

CARAMIA



Book One of the
Immortyl Revolution

DENISE VERRICO



Cara Mia - Book One of the Immortyl Revolution

by Denise Verrico

Dark Fantasy

Copyright © 2010 by Denise Verrico

First published in Spring, Texas, 2010

NOTICE: This ebook is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Duplication of this ebook by beaming, email, network, disk, paper, or any other method is a violation of international copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment.

Cara Mia — Book One of the Immortyl Revolution

By Denise Verrico

Published by L&L Dreamspell

Spring, Texas

Visit us on the web at www.lldreamspell.com

Copyright 2010 by Denise Verrico

All Rights Reserved

Cover and Interior Design by L & L Dreamspell

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations used in a review.

This is a work of fiction, and is produced from the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real people is a coincidence. Places and things mentioned in this novel are used in a fictional manner.

ISBN- 978-1-60318-159-4

* * * *

Published by L & L Dreamspell

Produced in the United States of America

Visit us on the web at www.lldreamspell.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very special thanks to Lisa, Linda and Cindy for their expertise and guidance. To my colleagues with the North Columbus Sci Fi and Fantasy Writers for their insight as I develop this series. To my son Donovan IV who listened to me read this book aloud, over and over, until I got it to sound right. To my lovely nieces, Maria and Jazz who are my biggest cheerleaders, and Daniel, the best pal a girl could have, who always makes me laugh when I'm discouraged. Lastly, to all my supportive extended family, especially my parents, who always told me to go for it, whatever it was. Dad, caro mio, I wish you were here to see this!

DEDICATION

* * * *

For my wonderful husband of twenty years, Donovan Johnson, who always urges me to reach for the stars.

PROLOGUE

* * * *

Manhattan 1986

Pain. My head and ribs ache. I taste blood. My lip is cracked and bleeding. God, it hurts. Where am I? It's the alley behind Ethan's house. How the hell did I end up out here?

Now I remember. He finally did it. He brought home another woman, Leisha. When I expressed my displeasure, he beat me and threw me out with the other trash.

The bare light bulb above my head bathes drifts of dirty snow in sulfur. Icicles gleam like bones of ancient creatures. Electrical wires form a network of blackened veins over a brownstone wall. Rats squeal and squabble over scraps of food from the garbage cans. Desolation.

This time he nearly finished me. What stopped him?

Come on let's go! Get up! Stamp the feet and wiggle the toes to get the blood flowing. Blood... My head is throbbing. There's only one way to stop it now. I need blood. Get moving girl.

Maybe this new woman will be smarter and get out quick. Where did it all go wrong? Or was it doomed from the beginning? Once it had been different. Once it was enchantment. It quickly became a nightmare. The bruises will fade fast enough. This body heals rapidly, but the soul? That's a longer and far more excruciating process. The demons refuse to rest.

The wind is really starting to kick up. My head won't stop pounding. I have to move on.

Brush the hair out of your eyes and fix your sights ahead, Mia.

How he hated the short haircut. This little act of rebellion riled him pretty good, but that was nothing compared to the words I hissed at him tonight.

“Does she know what you are?”

Gee thanks for the encouragement, now here I am, dumped along with the other refuse. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore... Where have I heard that before? Oh, it's that poem by Emma Lazarus about the Statue of Liberty. Liberty. Freedom. Freedom!

My future is uncertain. Barren. Bleak. But freedom beckons. Still, the pulse in my head echoes my fear. Go. Go on. NO. YES! Pain! We've known pain before. Fight it! Move on.

Where? I have no friends here, no family anymore, no cash, no plastic, not even a lousy subway token. I must find shelter soon. That's vital. I'll go back and pound on the door! Demand to be let in. I'll beg him if I have to.

Don't you dare! To hell with him! Find a way. Freedom!

Look at the icicles everywhere. They could kill someone if they fell. Stake them right through the heart maybe. Ice? It's a girl's best friend, so they say. But I can't pawn his first gift to me, this beautiful butterfly, with the dazzling blue and white stones set in its wings. Screw him, he bought you with trinkets and sweet, southern palaver. More reason to hock the damned thing!

I'll head downtown. The Upper East Side never really was my neighborhood anyway, much more Ethan's milieu. Why didn't I dress warmer tonight? Leather has a certain rakish charm, but isn't very warm. I'll sell my necklace to get some cash, and check into a hotel. A hot bath and a warm bed, that's something to look forward to. But what kind of place could I possibly afford? Certainly not the Plaza, those days are gone. Surreal.

My head throbs much worse. I'm starving and colder by the minute. Just keep going girl, the movement will warm you. My ribs at least feel much better now. What's that smell? Charcoal? Nice and warm, roasted chestnuts

like Papa used to make when I was little. That pawnshop where Ethan used to sell our takings, where was it? Near Times Square, I think, Forty-Second Street or maybe Eighth Avenue?

What time is it? I really should have worn my watch. I probably could have sold that, too. So much ice everywhere tonight. It's too slippery to walk really fast. The shops are all dark. It must be past ten. Snow softly falls and coats the grime. The city that never sleeps at least rests quiet for once. So still. It's weird to see New York streets nearly empty, but it's kind of peaceful and pretty.

It was winter when I first saw Ethan at the theatre, so many years ago. I nearly swooned.

He spoke in a lovely Virginia drawl. "Are you all right, Miss Disantini?"

"Just a bit tired after my performance."

I lied. He overwhelmed me, so tall and beautiful. His ice blue eyes looked on me with strange mix of awe and contempt. His laughter still rings in my head. Head throbbing. Throat dry. Pain in the gut now. I've got to get out of the cold soon. How many more blocks? Walk faster.

Got to get cash. So-o-o hungry! Hang on, girl. It won't be long. It's odd to be walking these blocks alone. You never know what lurks in the shadows. What's that noise? Nothing. The subway below. The wind whining through the caverns of buildings. Pigeons roosting on ledges. No ghouls for the moment in any case.

Seventh Avenue, finally, signs of life! Ah, the theatre district, my part of town, well at least it was for that brief affair. That's ancient history now. The shows must have just let out. Lots of tourists can be found here this time of year. A cornucopia of smells assails the olfactory. Pasta, garlic and fish. Those carnations at the bodega reek like a funeral parlor to me. Papa? Banish that thought! Concentrate on the important scents musk, iron and blood. Blood...

Times Square. Anything catch the eye? Group of teenagers in sheepskin jackets, Japanese businessmen, families with kids? No, not what I'm looking for. Keep going, cross Broadway and head south. Iron scent is sharp in the air, surrounding me on every side. Blood! I can't stand much more of this. Why tonight of all nights must I deal with this inconvenience?

Forty-fifth. I hate the Marriot Marquis. They tore down two theatres for this monstrosity? Hideous. Ethan was right. Culture is dead like Nietzsche, God and Queen Bloody Victoria. Hail to the twentieth century! Your child is back on the streets again!

Forty-second. Turn west. Out of the way moron! Jesus, what a pig, I bet he can't even see his prick anymore. How do they get so fat? Buzz. Buzz. They all sound like bugs to me. Like what you see? Must you stand in the middle of the sidewalk? Move you idiot! These porn titles are hilarious. Innocence Lost. If they only knew. No, I don't care to come inside and check it out.

I don't see the pawnshop anywhere. It can't be here. It must be on Eighth. The traffic's heavy and it's snowing much harder, turning the streets into rivers of brown slush. Careful not to slip. Look up the block, there it is, three golden balls on the sign above the door.

What do I smell? A teenaged girl stands huddled in the doorway across the street, probably looking to turn a trick. She's all alone. No one would miss her but her pimp. Her eyes are like glass, no expression, dead colder than me. Someone should put her out of her misery.

Forget it, she's not our flavor. Keep going, it's just a few more steps. No lights burn inside of the shop and the sign says closed until nine in the morning. Shit. Plan B? I'll go to the Port Authority, get out of the cold and access the situation. Maybe, I'll find one there.

What's that slinking up? Turn around and face him, he thinks he's sizing me up. Yellow crooked teeth grin. Wheels turn behind his pale eyes. He stinks like vegetable soup. Yuck. Not very appetizing, but we can't be fussy tonight. He speaks. Buzz. Buzz. That's a dangerous invitation you make, Loverboy. What's going on in that devious brain? You think this is all new to me? Or

have I played this game before? Oh, I've played with the masters. You're getting far more than you bargain for.

He wants to know my name. Go on; use that breathy little girl voice that always gets them.

“Mia.”

Let him put his arm around you and guide you to that fleabag hotel on the corner. The wind rips down the street and stings my cheeks. Pull the jacket collar tighter and let his arm draw you closer.

Here we go. Christ, this place is a real roach motel. But what can I do? I'm hungry and cold and it's getting later. Don't you dare desert me now!

Don't worry... I'm here. We're nearly one.

He opens the door to a tiny hole of a lobby. A huge cockroach crawls across the peeling wallpaper and down to the filthy linoleum floor. Loverboy saunters up to desk and wakes the old man snoring there. He whispers dark mission into the old man's hairy ear. Go on boys laugh. You won't have the last one, I promise you.

Loverboy approaches me with glazed eyes. No more talk? I'm really not in the mood for conversation anyway. Hungry! Head splitting in two! This elevator will never make it. It'll stop between floors, and we'll be stuck. Just what I need! No, there it goes. Wait for the door to open.

Loverboy beckons to me. I follow down a dank, dimly lit hallway. His heavy shoes clomp on the sagging floorboards. My boots are silent. He unlocks the door and pushes me into the room. It closes behind and he locks it up tight. He sits on a full sized bed sporting a fraying, olive green spread and picks up a remote from the wobbly nightstand to switch on the TV.

I know that music...

He turns to me and suggests I make myself more comfortable. He's all business. I lay my jacket over the back of the chair. His watery blue eyes

sweep over my body, collarbones to ankles. He takes pack of cigarettes from coat pocket and tips one out, tapping it against the nightstand. He pulls out a lighter and sticks the cigarette between thin lips. Lighting up, he takes a long drag. Smoke burns my nostrils and I cough.

“I hate cigarettes.”

He laughs. Have you decided yet who I am, Loverboy? Snow White or Rose Red? Madonna or Magdalene?

He makes his move, baring his teeth. His nicotine yellowed nails dig into my arms. Stubble scrapes like sandpaper on my face and my head throbs harder. Saliva flows into my mouth. I shudder in anticipation. Not much longer now.

He laughs again as his fingers slither to the buttons of my blouse. His breath smells of nicotine and cheap booze. The silk slips from my shoulders and he grasps my bared breasts. I can't help the moan. He breathes encouragement and buries his head in my cleavage, probing with tongue and lips. The bony tip of his nose jabs into my sternum.

Just play along a little more, Mia. He's almost where you want him. Lean your head against his. Close your eyes and breathe in deeply, ah, that yummy iron scent. Twine your fingers in the slippery hair and clasp him just a little bit closer. His breath is so hot on my body.

Feel the heartbeat, lub dub, lub dub, pumping blood to all parts of his body? Kiss that little pulsing spot on his throat. Just run the tongue over the ear and that slim cord beneath the salty flesh. Try that little trick with your hand.

He groans, nuzzling his face into my neck and pushes me down to the mattress. Thinks he's pretty strong, does he? Throw him off! Look at his face! He's pissed now. He balls his fist and draws back to punch. Raise your hand at us, animal? Go on, slug him in the face! He's down! Red spray! Blood! Blood!

He rips off his belt and gets up, slapping leather against his hand. Delicious red streams from his nose and down his chin as he closes in.

Reach for the throat now! Easy, don't crush it; the arterial spray is so much nicer when intact. Slam your quarry hard against the wall. Crack the head. Ah more blood, hot and syrupy sweet! Tighten the grip. Grab his balls, squeeze hard. Bring him close to the face. Slam him again, harder and show him the old pearly whites. That move always makes them wet themselves.

No screams? Is it hard to breathe? Why would I have sympathy for you? I'm the Bird of Prey! You're just a bleeding hunk of flesh! One small kiss and then goodnight... Surprised you, huh? Just a little sting, you hardly felt it. Not quite what you had in mind for this mouth? Terrified? Very nasty demons haunt you. They're coming for you. They have you in their grasp. There's no escape.

Try all you want but you can't get away. Ah, your flavor! I love the would-be predators, just the right bouquet. Red heat burns through me! Jet fuel! I soar!

What's that music on TV? Ave Maria, that's Pavarotti. Is it Christmas? Shit. Papa sang it at midnight mass— that last one we had together.

Ave Maria, gratia plene

Dominus tecum

Benedicta tu in mulieribus

Et benedictus, fructus ventris tui Jesus

Now you'll be a fucking, crying mess! Come on focus... focus on the scent. Iron! Salt! This is what we live eternally for. Shut it out! It's just a song. Go on, drink it all down. Hot, red delicious life!

Sancta Maria

Sancta Maria

Ora pro nobis...

Nobis peccatoribus

Nunct et in hora...

My head is clear now. I'm cozy and warm. Loverboy ceases to struggle. Mmm... Life ebbs away so easily, it's all mine now. You're all limp and senseless, Loverboy. Someone should pray for you.

"In hora mortis nostrae. Amen."

Stop that crap! But Papa left me so young. No one kept the demons away. Ah, come off it. You accepted the gift with open arms. Enjoy the ride, sweetheart.

I feel so old, so tired all of the sudden. I'll just lie down and enjoy the warmth, all those little drops of delight dancing in the cells. It's one hell of an orgasm. Too bad there isn't one of our own kind to consecrate this sacrament. One need satisfied and the other already troubling us.

Who's that? An apparition... an angel... or maybe the god of love? Lovely as the dawn surrounded by cascades of blood red flowers... I'm free now! Look! The sunrise and the beach are here, just like Brovik promised. Your breath and lips fall warm on my throat. Your weight on my body is lighter and sweeter than Ethan's ever was. Kurt, mio amore, spirit me away from the darkness.

Wake up! He's far from an angel. They're all the same. You fell for those big baby blues like a fool. Can't waste time on wet dreams of Brovik's little boy-toy.

No relief tonight. Or God knows when. What time is it? I must have drifted off. There's work to be done before I can indulge in hopeless dreams.

Yuck. Got to get rid of this thing on the bed, it already stinks. It's revolting. It was bad enough alive but dead it's even uglier. Eyes clouded, mouth open in a silent scream, it gets more disgusting by the minute.

I'll just rifle through the pockets and find enough money to get a hotel room. Nice black leather wallet, a little shy of thirty bucks in it. Not enough to get a room in New York, not at any hotel I know of. Leave it to me to choose the only pimp in New York with no money in his pocket. But I really didn't have the luxury to shop around under the circumstances. Ah well, we'll have to improvise.

Well, well what have we here? A Rolex, a real one. Well, it seems the vermin had expensive tastes. Something else to pawn. Also a gold chain around its neck and one diamond stud in its ear. That will help too. Maybe there's something to say for jewelry after all.

Don't forget the pack of cigarettes from the nightstand. Toss them on top of the corpse. Add the overcoat and suit jacket to the pile. Wrap the entire thing up in the bedspread. What time is it?

The Rolex says it's just after four. Guess I rested a little longer than I thought. After a kill I just feel like lounging for a while to savor the experience. Like a smoke after sex? Filthy habit. Smoking that is, the other I like too much.

Here comes the hairy part. One can't leave corpses lying about all over Manhattan. Don't provide fodder for the tabloids. One must clean up after meals. That's the rule. Ethan did teach something of value. I may be just a tad rebellious but this is one custom I understand.

Okay, throw the bundle over the shoulder. Did I forget anything? Nope. All nice and tidy. Open the door, quietly now and pause a moment to listen, nothing, not a creature stirring except for a vampire. This place reeks of bodily fluids, blood, urine and eau de amour. Close the door, good, not a sound. Down the hall to the back stairs, what you're seeking will be found in the basement.

This won't ever get any easier will it? Kill, eat and dispose, no one else around to help with the unpleasant details, Sweetpea.

These stairs are steep and kind of slippery. Jesus, don't they ever clean anything around here? The cobwebs have a distinctly ancient look to them,

right out of the late-late show. I hope to hell the basement door isn't locked. That could make a lot of unwelcome noise.

Okay, here goes nothing. Good, it's unlocked. It's dark. I'll wait a moment for the eyes to adjust to the darkness. There it is. Incinerators leave too much behind, Ethan always said, but this one was a scumbag. Lots of people hated him. Who thinks twice about a wasted pimp? Or a cast off concubine for that matter?

Don't start now. Christ, he'll never fit in one piece. I can jam the legs in just a little further, but the arms will have to come off. Remember the way he taught you? Knife through the tendons, between the joint, just like boning a chicken. There. Nice work. All blood is gone, no muss, no fuss. A fitting epitaph? Burn in hell little man.

What's this sensation running through me? Is this freedom? Freedom! You're free at last, little girl! Ethan said you couldn't do it.

“Ethan, you colossal prick, I’ll survive to see you rot. It’ll take a hell of lot more than you to kill me.”

ONE

* * * *

Genpath Laboratories, Southern California, 2000

* * * *

Joe wasn't happy. The neuroscientist's plans for a relaxing evening with his girlfriend were just ruined by Lydia Loy, his boss. Slamming the door to Lydia's office, he stalked down the hall to the security desk where a beefy, young red-haired man sat eating Chinese ramen soup from a Styrofoam cup.

"Where's the sergeant?"

The guard looked up, broth and undulating noodles dribbling down his chin, at the tall, dark, angry man in front of him. "Upstairs."

"Get him down here."

"He's got rounds."

"Get him the fuck down here, now!"

"Yes, Doctor." The guard picked up the phone and hit a button. "Sarge? Kramer here. You're needed. Nah, she's the same. One of the Docs... I'll tell him..." The guard looked up at Joe. "He'll be down in about twenty minutes."

"It's imperative I see the female subject immediately. Tell him now or I'll report him to Dr. Loy."

"It's real important Sarge... Right, I'll tell him." The guard hung up the receiver. "He's coming."

Joe set down his briefcase and medical bag, rapping his fingers impatiently against the gray granite desk. He glanced at his watch. Seven-thirty. Shit, he was supposed to be at Jean's place at eight. He'd never make it. Why did he have to go in there tonight? He was exhausted from setting up the new lab all day. The last thing he wanted to do was tangle with that thing in the cell. He wanted to be fully alert when he went in there for the first time. On top of that he felt a migraine coming on.

The elevator dinged and slid open. A huge sandy-haired man dressed in a khaki uniform and heavy black boots stood there with an annoyed expression on his pugnacious face. The Gulf War Vet's face held remarked distaste. Joe supposed he looked too much like the enemy to suit him.

The sergeant growled in a deep bass. "You wanted me?"

"I'm going in to see the female."

The sergeant paled a moment, pulling at his bushy mustache in consternation and nodded. "Right, follow me."

Joe scooped up his belongings from the counter and started down the gray-carpeted corridor behind the sergeant. "Dr. Loy says she attacked Rider. She's restrained?"

The sergeant grunted, "Sedated too," and strode to a door marked *Broom Closet*. "But we gotta take extra precautions."

Fumbling in his pockets he brought out a key ring to unlock the door. It swung open, revealing a neat little arsenal of rifles, tazers, clubs, cuffs and dart guns. Enough dangerous toys to keep the security boys happy, Joe reflected. The sergeant selected a high-powered rifle and loaded it.

"Is that really necessary?"

The guard looked at him oddly. "Doc, trust me on this one."

Joe's heartbeat accelerated. Rider, the psychiatrist, ended up with a dislocated shoulder and fractured pelvis when he attempted to interview the

subject. Apparently, she didn't take to him and decided to take him a few rounds. Now *he* was given the unsavory duty of trying to examine her. This wasn't exactly his specialty, but Lydia was convinced the violence had neurological significance.

Take a look— talk with her— see what you can make of it. Maybe you can calm her down.

The sergeant offered some unsolicited advice, "Listen pal— it ain't human."

Joe corrected him. "Doctor."

The sergeant's face worked as he digested Joe's comment. "It looks like a nice little girlie but its every instinct is to kill. Don't let down your guard for a minute."

At the end of the corridor another guard, a young, open-faced, African-American, sat in a chair between the doors leading to the two cells, also clutching a large caliber weapon in his hands.

The sergeant nodded to him. "Any change?"

"Howlin' like a banshee when I checked on her 'bout half-hour ago. Pitched a real fit at chow time. Turned the intercom off so's we didn't have to hear.
"

Joe frowned. "Chow time?"

"She wouldn't... eat. They transfused her," explained the sergeant. "We're going in. Get on the horn— have three more men stand by."

"Three?" Joe asked. "You've got to be kidding?"

The guard and the sergeant exchanged looks. A trickle of sticky sweat rolled down Joe's backbone. His polo shirt clung uncomfortably to his body. Was it his imagination or was it ten degrees hotter down on this level? He wiped his damp forehead and noticed a smudge of black ink on his

damp palm from the notebook Lydia had given him. *Damn it.* He rubbed it off on his jeans.

The corridor was oddly quiet. Most of the staff already had gone home for the night. Only the constant drip of the malfunctioning air conditioning provided ambient sound. Joe wondered if the guards could hear his hammering heart. He chided himself for irrationality but couldn't help wonder if *she* could hear it through the thick concrete walls. Did they listen for fresh heartbeats? For fresh blood? Nausea pitched his stomach.

The sergeant opened a keypad by the door. "Got your clearance code?"

Joe nodded, noticing a mangled mass of metal that had once been a chair near the door.

"It records whoever makes a visit to the cells, and when. Flash your ID first — then punch in your code. When the light blinks put your palm in the reader. The outer door will open. Inside is the observation door. Just the palm there."

"And to get out?"

"Fingerprint on the inside pad— if you need to get out fast. Didn't help the shrink though— she was all over him in a second. See that chair?"

Joe glanced at the twisted metal. "Yeah?"

The sergeant looked vaguely amused. "Imagine it's your spine. Left it to remind us what we're dealin' with."

Joe had no idea what to expect. Everything he'd been told up to now wasn't exactly comforting. In his research into neurological roots of anti-social behavior he'd dealt with dangerous individuals with all manner of bizarre conditions. But this *thing*? Never in his wildest imaginings could he have ever have conceived of this. *Vampirism?* Not some goofy Goth kid who dressed in black and drank animal blood as part of some ridiculous adolescent rebellion. Not a victim of porphyria, necrophilia or any garden-variety psychosis, but an honest-to-god, human blood-drinking, *immortal*

being. Apparently stronger and faster than humans to boot. Yet he was expected to go in there and talk, even reason with a blood-sucking monster out of a nightmare?

“Ready?”

A shiver passed down Joe’s vertebrae. He flashed the blue security card at the sensor and then deftly punched in the code. A series of beeps, reminding him of some old girl-group song from the early sixties, issued from the keypad. A small green light blinked. He placed his palm on the reader. A white painted door made of heavy steel, slid open. They passed through quickly as it closed behind with a whoosh and preceded to the next with its thick glass window. He saw nothing. The room was dark. It was below ground and there were no windows. Joe ran his palm over the smooth, cold surface of the glass. “Obviously she didn’t have any luck here.”

“That’s three inch bulletproof glass—even so—she’s not that big. Neither is *he*. I’d hate to run into a really big guy. If there’s two there’s bound to be more. Like roaches, for every one you see there’s ten thousand more crawling around in the walls.”

Joe chose to ignore the analogy. “Where is she?”

“On the bed—tied up in a neat little package. Flipped out the minute we put her in without him. Lerner tried to talk sense. When we finally pulled her off him, Dr. Loy gave her the shot to calm her down. Took five of us to hold her. Knocked her flat in a second. Slept a long time, but when she woke up she started cussin’ everyone out.”

“And him?”

“The Docs took ‘em for check-ups when they got here, and then we brought ‘em separately to their cells. The boy’s pissed but he just stares when we look in, real creepy-like. There’s an intercom button on the wall to talk to her.”

Joe took a deep breath then buzzed the intercom. Not really sure how to address her he called out cautiously, “Good evening, Ms. Disantini.”

“Fuck you,” a voice snarled back. “I’ll pull your balls over your head if you touch me.”

Joe wasn’t unaccustomed to being cursed at. In his residency he’d dealt with his share of Tourette’s cases and got over shouted obscenities pretty quick, besides he’d known the sound of hatred aimed at him ever since he’d come to this country. Joe answered breezily, even though he was scared shitless, “I’m Doctor Ansari, chief of neuroscience.”

“Another god-damned nerd coming to prod at me? Go fuck yourself, unless you have a key to this dump. What have you done with Kurt? I want to see him!”

“We’ll have to speak with Doctor Loy about that.”

“Tight-assed bitch gave the orders to lock us up.” There was a long pause before she spoke again. “You don’t sound like a nerd.” She paused again, as if weighing whether or not to let him in. Suddenly, she called out. “Let’s have a look at you, Doctor Asshole. Leave the baboon outside.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The sergeant, I can *smell* him out there.”

Joe eyeballed the rifle. The sergeant was just a little too eager to plug the subject, and scared or not, this was Joe’s opportunity of a lifetime. He released the intercom button. “I’m going in. Please wait here.”

The sergeant scratched his buzz-cut head, his face wrinkling up like confused Pekinese pup. “Can’t let you do that Doc.”

“I don’t need you.”

“Doc, that thing’s not human. Hey, I was fooled too.” The sergeant leaned over to him and spoke confidentially, “She’s hot.”

Joe wasn’t really sure what that bit of information mattered. “Wait outside.”

“Doctor Loy said no one goes in there without an armed escort.”

“I’ll deal with Doctor Loy.”

The sergeant shook his head. “Whatever you say. Hit the buzzer if you need help. I’m right outside if she gives you any trouble.”

Joe opened the observation doors, stepping inside quickly as they slid closed behind him, snapping on the overhead fluorescents.

“Shut them, damn it!”

He snapped them off. “I can’t see in the dark.”

“Neither can I, asshole. There’s a lamp next to the door.”

He felt around for the lamp, nearly knocking it over with his shaking hands, and clicked it on. The room filled with soft, pinkish light. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a surprisingly small figure lying hunched up by the restraints on a low bed in the center of the small cell.

“I can’t see you. They have my head restrained. Stand over here.”

Joe walked over to the bed, every muscle tense, just in case this was a trick. A scent perfumed the air, like musk, a hint of sex in the bouquet. *Bizarre*. She was on her side, straight jacketed and strapped securely in a fetal position. He relaxed slightly. They’d put a leather mask over her face, like a muzzle, obviously to prevent biting. A pair of glittering, dark, almond-shaped eyes swept over him.

“Well, this is definitely more like it. You’re the prettiest nerd I’ve ever seen — Dr. Asshole.”

“Ansari. My...” he faltered, “My name is Ansari.”

“Mmm, love a little *taste* of you.”

The room grew hotter, his skin clammier. He loosened buttons on his polo shirt. Insistent pounding started in his head. Ignoring the comment, he set down his bag on the bed. “Dr. Rider was in?”

She replied in a breathy whisper. “He left rather abruptly. Aren’t you afraid?”

He chose his words carefully. “I’d rather not end up like Dr. Rider.”

“You’re already points ahead of that myopic toad. I like the way *you* look.”

He pulled a pen out of his pocket. “I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“Get me out of the S&M gear and we’ll see.”

His shirt was drenched now. A chill passed over him as the air conditioning kicked on. He weighed the probabilities. She wouldn’t cooperate with the restraints. But could he trust her if he released her? Panic gripped his chest. She might kill him. If he didn’t release her, the interview was at an end.

“At least take off this mask,” she breathed. “I promise I don’t look as horrible as I sound.”

He made his decision and began unfastening the strap holding her neck down, hands trembling. The buckle caught in her thick, dark hair. He worked to unsnarl it as if it was one of his twin daughters’ barrettes. Who knew if she felt pain? It was the most nerve-wracking task he’d ever performed—like a cop on the bomb squad sent in to disarm an explosive. He kept expecting her to break free of the straps and strangle him. Finally he worked the metal free from her hair and removed the mask. He wasn’t prepared for the sight.

How could something so foul look so... well... *pure*? Her face was pretty, but not in the conventional, All-American way but in the timeless fashion of a renaissance Madonna, a Leonardo, disturbing in its apparent youth and innocence. Its porcelain skin was smooth, framed by the somewhat short, dark hair. Her cheeks were round and pinkish, and the smallish mouth like an absurd little rosebud. Her arresting hazel eyes cut him to the quick: deep, sharply intelligent, looking straight into his, glittering enigmatically. Shards of broken mirror. They’d seen a hell of a lot more than the innocence of her countenance suggested.

Her voice dropped somewhere deep in her chest, rich and resonant, screen sirenish, “Not quite what you expected Doctor?”

“Sorry?”

“The girlish phiz.” A smile gelled and set on her face as she stared back.

Disturbed, he looked away and down to his clipboard. “I’ve been sent to do a basic assessment—I have a few simple questions.”

“Never said I’d answer any questions. Where’s Kurt?”

He looked up. She regarded him like the proverbial cat. He turned away again. The probing eyes spooked him too much. He covered by jotting down bogus notes on his clipboard. The only thing he’d really observed so far was that she was as intimidating as hell. “He’s right next-door.”

“If he was I could hear him.”

“These walls are at least a foot-thick.”

“I can hear better than *you*.”

“He hasn’t said much.”

“No, he wouldn’t. How is he?”

“He hasn’t attacked anyone, if that’s what you mean. I haven’t been to see him.”

“Get me out of this thing.”

“I’ve been advised not to.”

“But you have the authority?”

He hesitated. “Yes.”

“You think for an instant I’d treat *you* like those baboons? You’re obviously evolved a notch or two above them.” Her voice grew husky again, “To a gentleman I can be a lady.”

His gut told him she was telling the truth. Still, if he pissed her off somehow, he could end up a mangled mess like the chair in the corridor. He was dealing with a large, dangerous animal, only this animal was equipped with an intellect and from what he saw, a pretty sharp one. He was uncertain how to treat her—even if he’d addressed her properly. Were there certain cultural mores they observed? A social ranking? She spoke to him with certain arrogance. Racism perhaps? He could deal with that. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Taking out a small light, he said, “Look into the light, follow it with your eyes.”

“Ooh, how commanding.”

Despite her mocking, she complied without protest. Was she playing some kind of game? He jotted down his observations on the clipboard, and then followed with some simple tests of response to visual and aural stimuli. The tests were crude compared to the precise laboratory instruments. Her responses were extremely rapid. He longed to test her reflexes and muscle control but that would involve releasing her from the restraints and he wasn’t quite ready to take that leap of faith. All he wanted to do was to get this over with and escape in one piece. He didn’t trust her and doubted if she trusted him.

But his mission was to *win* that trust. At the last moment Lydia thrust these grimy little notebooks into his hands and ordered him to read them to see what he could make of them. They were found when they’d ransacked her backpack, the only thing she’d brought with her. Both of them had arrived bedraggled, with the clothes on their back, he with a laptop computer in a case and she with the small leather bag. He wondered why Lydia had found it necessary to search it.

He rubbed his eyes in agitation. Too much was left unsaid on both sides. Lydia obviously had nefarious motives in sending him in here, but his

distaste couldn't outweigh his desire to get to the bottom of the situation.

He already had too much on his plate. But now that Rider was laid up, Lydia explained, someone had to work with them. Find out what made them tick, she said. Why him? Because, he was the only one left on the staff with any expertise in treating mental disorders she told him. But only from a neurological standpoint, he argued. Besides, he'd wasted very little time in clinical, moving quickly into research. He wasn't exactly noted for his bedside manner. Yes, he was very interested in what secrets her brain would reveal, but he didn't care to hear them coming out of her mouth.

He'd glanced over the first few pages then thrown them down in disgust. Now here he was, trying to maneuver his way around the over-inflated ego of a monster that looked like a Madonna. But one detail nagged him ever since he'd talked with Lydia; *why didn't she try to run away after she'd clobbered Rider?* Any captive animal would have, given the chance. Instead she remained. That made no sense. She could have easily killed the guards and released her companion. Something kept her in check and made her stay. Maybe the key to gaining her cooperation was figuring out what. Was there some thorn he could remove to win her trust? A gesture, which might appease her? The notebook Lydia had ordered him to read lay on top of his bag. Maybe, just maybe...

Thinking he was crazy, he started to loosen the straps around the vampire's arms. Probably be killed for his pains, he reflected. She looked up, not bothering to quash her surprise. "To test your reflexes," he explained. Unfastening the heavy leather restraints from her legs, he held his breath, terrified one of the small, black-booted feet would crush his sternum. He tried not to tremble, sensing she'd pounce on his fear but she just stayed there watching him. Sizing him up perhaps? Evaluating him as an adversary... or a potential meal?

She didn't bother to thank him when he finally freed her, accepting it perhaps as if it were her due. Rolling onto her side she pushed herself to her feet, languidly stretching her muscles like a sated leopard. He couldn't help looking. Her small body was compact, but lushly curved, tits and ass filling out the black denim jeans and semi-sheer lacy top nicely. It telegraphed youth and fertility to his unwary libido.

She turned and caught his confounded stare. “Should I undress, Doctor?”

He steered his mind off the pictures her body prompted. “No. I’m only testing your reflexes.”

She looked pointedly at his crotch. “Yours seem to be in good working order.”

She stretched again then took a leisurely stroll around the perimeter of the cell, closing in a small circle as she moved toward him. Joe tensed for potential attack, calculating just how quickly he could go for the buzzer if she pounced. The odds didn’t look good.

A girlish giggle rippled from her. “Weird isn’t it? To know a woman could rip you to pieces? Don’t be frightened. I have better ways of vanquishing enemies.”

She shook out her thick hair as she moved toward him. Musky perfume grew strong in the air. His eyes strayed to her breasts again. He wanted to touch. Touch her? Shit, he wanted to *fuck* her. The thought horrified him but his body was in disagreement. Jean would laugh and say men would have sex with anything that moved.

But the way she moved... like something fluid, rippling around the small cell as if she had no bone or sinew, only one great long undulation of curve. It was inhuman. No human female no matter how graceful or seductive could move like this.

He had to look away or he was a dead man. Reaching down, he came up with the notebooks and held them out to her. Her kittenish attitude instantly evaporated. Now, she stood motionless, which was somehow much more inhuman and frightening than before. The texture of her skin was like smooth and lustrous stone, her eyes reflective brown-green gems. Only her hair retained its softness.

“How did you get these?”

“They were found in your knapsack.”

Pure malice twisted her features. “Surprised they didn’t check our mouths for gold.”

“Sorry?”

“Did you read them? Did you!”

“Only the first ten pages or so— obviously, these are private thoughts. It’s not right to read them without permission. Here, take them.”

Her face smoothed out again, like a shape-shifting alien in a sci-fi movie, suddenly not expressing any visible emotion. After a moment she reached out to take the notebooks. Turning her back on him, she crossed to the bed, tucking them under the pillow. As she turned to face him musky perfume hit him again.

Now he realized what it was. *A pheromone, like an insect would use to lure prey.* A usually unperceived olfactory cue some species attracted potential mates with, or as in this case, lunch. Every time she shook her hair back, the scent grew stronger, released there, maybe through a gland, maybe through the pores. *Amazing...*

His mind tangled for a moment in waves of chestnut brown. He shook himself out of it. She was controlling him with the scent. He’d read a story once as a kid, about *Lamia*, female demons with perfumed hair that seduced and drained the life force from their male victims. It couldn’t be true.

She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. “You’re the neurologist?”

“Neuroscientist,” he corrected.

“First they send a shrink, then you. Think I’m crazy?”

“You’re quite lucid,” he answered. “But Dr. Loy feels there may be a neurological basis for your... uh... violent tendencies.”

“Gotta bad temper when I’m lied to.”

“Then why didn’t you escape when you had the chance? You could have sprung your boyfriend and ran away.”

Surprising color rose in her face. “She promised us sanctuary.”

Sanctuary? A word someone hunted or persecuted might use. Which was she? He thought it wise to say nothing—best not to antagonize her further. At least now he had an inkling of what her dilemma could be.

Her face rapidly composed itself back into a cool white mask. “Listen, I appreciate you returning my notebooks, but you tell that bitch I’m not giving up a drop of blood until Kurt’s in my bed.” She wandered over to the far side of the cell, pressing her ear to the wall. “He’d better be okay.”

She feared they meant him harm. Joe jotted down this thought. “I’ll speak to Doctor Loy.”

“I don’t trust your Doctor Loy.”

Well, that was one point they agreed on. He smiled slightly, in spite of himself.

She quickly picked up on this. “You don’t either.”

“Never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Clairvoyant?”

“Doc, you’re a scientist. You don’t believe in that crap?”

“Neither do you, I take it.”

A smile spread slowly over her face as she recited, a child repeating a lesson, “There’s nothing that can’t be explained scientifically.”

“You obviously read visual and aural cues and perhaps changes in body chemistry by scent. Let’s see what else you can do.” He produced a small

rubber ball from his pocket, throwing it high into the air. “Catch.”

She leapt straight up to the twelve-foot ceiling without effort, snatching the ball from the air and closing her fist about it. As she touched the ground noiselessly, she opened her palm beneath his nose. Grains of material that had once been the ball littered the ground in front of him. “I didn’t come here to do tricks.”

Joe straightened up in his chair, staring her down. “Then why are you here?”

She gave him a blank look again.

“Are you in danger?”

She laughed.

“You find that funny?”

“You’re a very entertaining doctor, in so *many* ways.”

Joe ventured a chance. “You must be in trouble somehow or you would have set him free and high-tailed it out of here.”

“Haven’t you ever seen the scary movies? We get this really bad sunburn and all the Coppertone in the world won’t help.”

“You had an opportunity long before the sun rose. You must need our help.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“You want to be cured.”

“Think this is some kind of disease?”

“I don’t really know how to characterize your condition.”

She tossed her hair back and laughed. “I’m fucking immortal. I get to keep this face and body forever. Can you say the same?”

“You kill to survive.”

She shrugged. “I do you a favor by cleaning up the vermin. I’m not one of those poor deluded assholes in an Anne Rice novel who mopes around feeling sorry for myself. Listen my good doctor, I may not be old in terms of my own kind but I’ve lived a lot longer than you. Go ask some fellow mortals about this transient thing you call happiness—ask them about love too while you’re at it. Ask them if they’d rather be young, powerful and beautiful forever. Ask yourself.”

“You have a good reason to be here or you’d be long-gone.” He chanced another hypothesis. “Kurt’s in danger?”

She licked her bottom lip. “Take me to visit him and I’ll be real nice to you later.”

“I can’t do that and you know it.”

“Then you’re not the man I think you are.” She turned away, sauntering over to the bed to sit down, regarding him strangely. “You know Doc, you have a *quality*...”

This took him aback. She enjoyed catching him off guard with these personal observations. Not unlike other women with their constant, damned analysis of personality.

“A certain *glitter*. I could be mistaken, but it’s usually so clear...”

Trying to divert the conversation with some little mind-game? Annoying, but he wasn’t making the rules here. He was forced to play along. “What?”

She reclined on the bed, giggling. “You won’t like it. Mortals are like so many insects, constantly buzzing around, often annoying, sometimes loathsome but every once and a while this big, gorgeous butterfly floats into your view. A *superior* specimen... What I’m saying is—I see one of us inside of you.”

If she'd taking a flying leap and knocked him flat he wouldn't have been surprised but this wasn't something he'd ever expected to come out of her mouth. "You're bullshitting me."

"Told you, you wouldn't like it—but I won't tell—it'll be our little secret. You've always believed yourself a cut above the rest. If anyone could challenge the inscrutable Dr. Loy, it would be you. But maybe I'm wrong and you're just another grub crawling in the dirt."

Clever. She was baiting him into aiding her. An odd choice of tactics but it was working. He couldn't back down now. She clearly understood how much Lydia galled him. What else could she tell about him?

Joe stuck on a smile. "You had me going." She smiled smugly. She'd won a round but he wasn't backing down. He took up his smile again, one he knew women found irresistible. "I'll do everything in my power to convince Lydia to allow you to be together."

She approached him. Uncertain of her intention, he stood his ground but a telltale sweat broke out on his upper lip.

"I'm not going to hurt you Doc. Scout's honor," she whispered, reaching up to brush his face, her fingertip touching the drop of moisture forming against his will above his mouth. "Just trying to illustrate a point."

Her surprising touch filled him with awe. He could barely verbalize his amazement, "*You're warm!*"

Her hand didn't leave his cheek. "I'm not dead, or *undead* as I believe the term is." She carried his hand to her own face. "I'm as alive as you are but I'm fully realized, while you're a mere embryo." Her eyes widened, reflecting his image in the dark pupils.

He backed away from her. "No..."

"Convince me otherwise." She laughed low in her throat. "I've embraced the inhumanity of man intimately—takes one to know one."

“You can’t judge me by your standard.”

She shrugged and picked up the hand mirror on the table, admiring her reflection. “I’m paying you a high compliment. You have courage and superior ability.” She flipped her hair, setting the mirror down. “Get me what I want and I’ll cooperate with you.”

“You must understand the fear.”

“I understand Doctor Loy’s fear. Tell her I understand *completely*. But Kurt and I bunk together or there’s no project.” She crossed her arms, business-like. “I personally bear you no malice, Doctor. You’re merely the go-between. You don’t trust me and frankly I don’t trust you. You have no real desire to befriend me. You’re an opportunist but from one avowed taker to another, I respect that. I don’t want to hurt you or any of your little mortal friends but tell your boss that if anything happens to Kurt, I’ll dispatch her and every other *soul* in this facility to hell. *Capiche?*” She paced away from him. “I won’t put up with being manhandled by those baboons and I won’t be restrained. And for crissakes fix the air-conditioning, it drips constantly. Tell all that to your Doctor Loy.”

“Of course, I’ll make it very clear.”

“We need some things. As you know we brought very little with us.”

“Make a list. I’ll come by tomorrow to get it.”

As he turned to place his fingerprint in the reader, she touched his shoulder. He started, not hearing her creep up on him, heart pounding.

“You have a name? What should I call you?”

He turned to face her. “Joe, you can call me Joe.”

“Simple and to the point, I like that.”

“What should I call you?”

“Anything, but late for dinner. You can laugh.”

“I didn’t find it amusing.”

“Lighten up, it’s a fucking depressing world if you can’t laugh, take it from me. I’m Mia.” She smiled, for the first time revealing her incisors. “Don’t disappoint me, Joe.”

Bile splashed up into his esophagus. He backed to the exit reader, watching her for any sudden move, but she just stared back, shaking her head.

TWO

* * * *

The elfin woman in the chair opposite Joe tried to remain cool, black eyes glaring over the tops of her glasses. Joe rather enjoyed it. “Who told you to remove the restraints?” Her black-bobbed head shook, making her appear a tiny petulant child behind the mound of expense reports and requisitions for equipment he had dumped on her desk. “She’s just looking for an opportunity to escape!”

“*Escape* implies they’re imprisoned. They volunteered.”

Lydia’s voice calmed, as her small, triangular face smoothed out. “She attacked one of my staff. We had no choice but to restrain her. You’ve read the notebooks?”

Joe couldn’t wait to drop this one on her. “I gave them back to her.”

“You gave back a critical tool to understanding them.”

“Shouldn’t it be her decision? It’s a personal journal.”

“Listen Joe, we don’t have much time.”

“Then give me *carte blanche* to do this my way.”

“I thought you resented this assignment?”

“I’ve made some progress with her. She’s willing to negotiate. I’ll see this through until you get someone to replace Rider. First, no more restraints—she doesn’t want to escape and you know it.”

“I don’t know that.”

“Bullshit Lydia. She’s scared of something.”

Lydia removed her glasses. “They claim they’re hunted by other vampires — what they’re doing is verboten.”

“Sanctuary...”

“I’m sorry?”

“She said you promised sanctuary. Now she’s worried you’re out to harm her boyfriend in some way.”

“That’s ridiculous. He’s invaluable to us. It’s incredibly fortunate to have a subject of each sex. Why would we want to hurt him? Assure her that the well being of both of them is the company’s utmost concern, but the well being of my staff is *my* utmost concern. It’s not a permanent situation. Once everyone is comfortable, we’ll relax things.”

“At least get a phone for them to talk.”

“I’ll bring it up with Lee Brooks. We’re already way over budget.”

“A couple of phones aren’t going to break the company. And by the way, she needs some things.”

Lydia shook her head. “According to their contract they must pay for their personal needs aside from... uh... nourishment.”

“Now we’re honoring contracts?”

“There’s nothing in the contract stipulating they be housed together— just that they’re comfortable and secure.”

“Trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey, drugged and apart from your partner is hardly what I would call comfortable and secure.”

“Be reasonable. Assure her it’s just a matter of time. And as long as she continues to behave reasonably, I’ll agree she’s only restrained for test purposes. But the guards must be present at all times.”

“She despises them.”

“Her personal feelings aren’t the issue. The *baboons*, as she refers to them, are necessary for everyone’s safety, including theirs. We must be very cautious. Dr. Rider believes they lack basic empathy. In any case, they’re highly dangerous and can’t be judged by any standard of human behavior.”

“She’s no sociopath. Call it crazy, but I suspect she has a higher purpose in being here. She *wants* to be here. As much as she hates the situation, it’s very important to her. Not just because she’s afraid of *them*. It runs deeper.”

Lydia’s eyes gave away less than Mia’s. “Promise her if she behaves I’ll relent. Get her everything else she wants or needs within reason, at the company’s expense, and for him too, for that matter. I’ll do whatever I can to help. You have carte blanche.”

Joe rose to leave. “Just until you get someone to replace Rider.”

“Of course, go see her again tonight. Stop in and see him too.”

Joe’s stomach sickened. “Him?”

Lydia handed him a slim file, which contained a medical work-up on the subject. “Kurt Eisen is his name. He’s been quite docile so far but he won’t talk to me, or anyone else for that matter. Maybe he’ll talk to you. You’ve done wonders with her.”

Joe shut the door, tension building in his head. Wonderful, now he had two charges and the thought of the male frightened him more. He flipped open the file to read it as he strode toward Mia’s cell.

He didn’t see Lydia break into a self-satisfied smile when he closed the door, tapping her pencil against the desk as she picked up the phone to tell Lee Brooks.

Still not awake, Joe observed when he reached Mia’s cell. He frowned and cleared his throat, barking, “Seven p.m. Wake up!”

Her voice was harsh and groggy, like someone who had had too much to drink the night before. “Can’t a girl get any sleep around this place? Can’t

even be past sundown.”

He wasn’t about to be intimidated. “You’ve overslept. Sun’s been down for twenty minutes.”

He snapped on the overhead lights even though she hated the glare. Cursing, she sat up, rubbing at her eyes. “Shut them, you bastard!”

The sheet fell, uncovering her naked body. He turned away. “We need to talk. Get up and put some clothes on.”

The pheromone drifted his way. “Don’t have any clean clothes.”

“I’ll get you some in the morning. Just put *something* on.”

She took her time. Finally, she was attired in black lace panties and tank top. “Acceptable to your delicate sensibilities?”

His eyes ran down her curves. “It’ll do. I talked to Lydia like I said I would.”

“And?”

“She refuses until she’s convinced neither of you are a danger to the staff.”

“You believe that?”

“I’ve always known her to be a woman of her word.”

“Marvelous to live in a world where someone’s word still means something. So she sends you to bring the bad news. Wonder why? But at least I have the pleasure of your company.”

He set down his case. “Lydia agreed you wouldn’t be restrained except when you’re being tested.”

“And those charming gentlemen from security?”

“Only when staff needs to come in here— and Lydia is looking into phones.”

“Phones? Bullshit, she’d listen in anyway. She’s stalling. No deal, Doctor.” She pulled a chair from the desk and straddled it backwards, Marlene Dietrich style.

“I don’t know the reason you agreed to all of this or even how you came to find us, but you must have a reason. If you don’t help us, how can we help you? I swear, I’ll continue to lobby for you and Kurt.”

She shook her head. “I doubt you have any influence after all.”

“I’m the best. They’re damn lucky to have me.”

“Your lack of false-modesty is refreshing. You’re brilliant, but full of hubris Doctor.”

“Hubris?”

“Tragic heroes suffer from hubris.”

“Right.”

“You had no idea what I meant. You have no idea what you’re up against—but you’re no coward. I believe you’ll fight for us but my problem still remains. Kurt’s on one side of the wall and I’m on the other.”

“Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“Perhaps...” She rose from her chair and went over to the desk to open a locked drawer. It amazed him how tiny she really was, no taller than his eleven-year-old twins. After rummaging for a moment, she pulled out a cream-colored envelope with the Genpath logo and brought it to him. “If someone could act as postman between us? Someone not enamored of the inscrutable Dr. Loy? I’d be distressed if our intimate missives were to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Deliver love letters between you? Fair enough. By the way, Lydia authorized me to obtain anything you and Kurt might need— at company expense.”

“This cell is hopeless. The sheets are cheap. Get new ones.”

“So much for resting on the soil of your homeland,” he muttered under his breath.

“I wouldn’t recommend the soil of Flatbush Avenue to anyone. Pima cotton.”

“Pima cotton?”

“Fine Egyptian cotton— three hundred threads per square inch at the very least. And drawing and painting supplies.”

“You’re an artist?”

“I’m a vampire. I paint in my spare time. Books, toiletries, clothes, *lingerie*. Send your girlfriend if you’re embarrassed.”

He ignored her remark. “So we’re on? You’ll answer my questions?”

She flipped her hair off her face. “Hmm...”

“Who’s hunting you?”

“Who told you that?”

“Lydia. What did you do?”

Her face twisted into distaste. “First, I was born a girl.”

“Huh?”

She shrugged. “I have a habit of pissing others off.”

“That I find difficult to believe. So you *are* hiding out?”

“Nosy, aren’t you? Why are you haranguing me— aside from official snitch duty?”

“Seems to me we’re the ones who stand to profit most.”

Her eyes glazed over. “When the idols fall, we’ll dance on the ruins...”

“Idols?”

She shook her head, her mind obviously having danced somewhere far off. Just *whom* was she dancing there with?

“All right Mia, I did my part. Promise to do yours.”

Suddenly she was back in the room. “Gee, heard that plenty of times before, usually after men buy me dinner.” Malice flavored her smile. “Just remember Doc, who ends up dessert.”

He shuddered at her gastronomical reference.

“I won’t tell anything until I know Kurt’s safe.” Her face set into cherubic resolve. “Bring me back his answer. Then we’ll talk.”

He stood up, placing her letter in his pocket. “Fine.”

“Don’t bother to read it. You won’t be able to— neither will Dr. Loy for that matter.”

Joe supposed they communicated in some kind of code unknown to mortals. “I’ve no intention of it falling into enemy hands.”

“Good. Get out.”

Joe let himself out and continued down the hall to the next cell. The huge guard nodded and grunted, moving aside to let Joe pass. Joe took a deep breath before he placed his palm in the reader of the inner door.

The male looked up but said nothing as Joe entered. A narrow beam of light from the lamp next to his chair carved his fine-boned face into an ivory

mask. Large, haunted blue eyes regarded Joe impassively. His shape was that of a very young man but one undernourished. He sat upright, dressed in blue jeans, a soft button down shirt and sneakers, tawny blond curls clipped and combed. Long delicate fingers held a book.

Silent, shunning the fluorescent lights as Mia did, but in contrast to the way she paced like a caged animal about the perimeters of her cell, he sat in solemn stillness, a condemned man waiting for the hangman. Yet to Joe's eyes, he appeared alien, unlike Mia who looked human and female.

The male hadn't spoken in three days. When anyone approached, he just fixed an icy blue stare and they'd back off in terror. A basin of water containing a plastic bag filled with blood sat in the sliding panel beside the door. Nausea gripped Joe momentarily, surprising him. He'd seen surgery performed on the brains of living people. Why did this bother him so much?

Joe cleared his throat. "Good evening, I'm Doctor Ansari. I've brought a letter from Mia. I'm not sure how you prefer to be addressed."

The vampire's eyes blinked once as he replied in a boyish voice, his English slightly accented, "You may call me Kurt."

"Very well then... Kurt. How are you getting on?"

The vampire stared at him. Sudden tension flared between them. Kurt tugged at the left sleeve of his shirt then smoothed it down with his fingers. "Mia attacked a staff member. I heard screaming and shouting."

"Yes, the psychiatrist."

Kurt shook his head. "What have they done to her?"

"She was restrained and sedated until she calmed down."

"You're the neuroscientist. I've read your work." Kurt smoothed his hand again over his shirtsleeve. "I suppose it's pointless to ask when we'll be re-united."

"Dr. Loy assures me it should be soon. You read scientific journals?"

The vampire's wary expression didn't change, nor did he answer the question put to him. "You're authorized to carry communication between us?"

"No, but I'm assigned to work with Mia until Dr. Rider is replaced."

Kurt's unearthly eyes ran over Joe again, searching. Joe was *very* uncomfortable.

"Aside from neurological studies, I've been assigned to begin a behavioral profile based on anecdotal data. So far she hasn't cooperated. I'm hoping to gain her trust so she will."

"To this end you've gone against your superior?"

Kurt tugged again at his shirt cuff. *Interesting*, Joe observed, a nervous gesture, hiding something yet calling attention to it at the same time.

Joe continued, "I don't agree with Lydia. It stinks you've been separated without your consent. I'll do all I can to help you both. I've been authorized to obtain anything you need... personal items."

Kurt's disturbing eyes lowered to his book again. "I arranged for the rental of a piano."

This surprised Joe. "Piano?"

The vampire's voice tensed. "Yes, a piano. Also, I require my notebook computer. It's pointless to try to access anything. I made sure of that. I want it back."

Well, he could be an arrogant little cuss.

"Give me a list. I'll see to it personally."

Kurt looked up again with his probing gaze and moistened his lower lip with his tongue as Joe pretended to make notes on his clipboard. "Come by tomorrow night for my reply. No one but Mia must see it. Understand? Look at me, Doctor, when I address you."

Joe wasn't about to cross either of them. He looked Kurt in the eye.

The vampire's expression softened. "I'd like to arrange for flowers for Mia — a single red rose for each night we're apart. Make sure it's perfect and accompanies my letter."

Was the monster a romantic?

Kurt took a small leather notebook and pen from his shirt pocket. He jotted down some items and tore the list out, handing it to Joe with the assurance of one used to giving orders. "These are the items I require. Please don't deviate from the list." He replaced the notebook in his pocket. His pale face suddenly clenched. "Go—I don't wish to be disturbed."

Joe didn't waste any time exiting. Taking a last quick look as the observation door closed between them, he saw Kurt take up the basin containing the bag of blood in his hands and stare at it in disgust. Sensing Joe staring, he scowled before snapping off the lights.

THREE

* * * *

The next evening Joe reappeared at Kurt's cell with two large shopping bags containing the clothing and other items they'd asked for. Joe noticed the notebook computer wasn't on the desk as requested, however the vampire sat now on the bench of a sleek, concert grand with the name *Steinway and Sons* emblazoned above the keyboard, fingers resting on the keys as if about to play.

"You got your piano."

Without any thanks the vampire replied, "You failed in obtaining my computer. The letter is on the table. Leave the parcels by the door. And the rose? Show me."

Joe produced the rose, wrapped in tissue, surrounded by ferns. The vampire shook his head.

"What's wrong? I specifically asked for the best."

Kurt gestured at the wrappings. "Get rid of that trash."

"Right." Joe removed the ferns and paper, placing them in the wastebasket by the door and handed the flower to the vampire.

Kurt examined it as if appraising a diamond for occlusions. "Passable."

Christ, it was just a *flower*. Joe grew more and more annoyed by their superior attitude. Taking for granted hours he spent tracking down grand pianos, silk panties and long stemmed red roses. They were *very* particular. *He* specified costly designer lines for his simple trousers and cotton shirts. His shoes alone cost a small fortune. *She* had to have a particular brand of lily-of-the-valley perfume and bath oil from the most expensive shop, not to mention Pima cotton sheets, goose-down comforter and pillows. He'd

begun to think of them as a couple of spoiled brats. Luckily Jean had agreed to shop for *her*, sparing him the agony of those floral-scented, pastel boutiques. But, he reflected, at least they weren't attacking him.

Kurt handed the rose back. "Don't forget my letter." A glimmer of expression passed over his disturbingly youthful face. "Thanks for your trouble, Doctor."

Joe was taken aback, regarding this sudden change in attitude. "You're welcome."

As if reading his thoughts the vampire explained, "You've been fair to Mia and me where others haven't."

"That's quite a trick you two have."

"Not if one's observant. Try it, Doctor, you may find it useful—particularly when matters of honesty are at stake."

Joe wondered if there was a hidden meaning in Kurt's words. "I'll remember that."

The vampire smiled, chilling Joe to the core, a disarming, boyish smile that conflicted sharply with the haunted eyes. "Don't ever give me reason to question yours. Good evening, Doctor."

What the hell did that mean? Kurt was subtle. Deep currents ran through what little he said. This was no boy but a wary, shrewd old man who'd lived through a hell of a lot, a survivor. Joe didn't take his eyes off Kurt as he let himself out. Kurt just looked back, appraising him with his sapphire stare.

Damn it, how much did Lydia know about Kurt and Mia? She must know where they came from and why. Where did she find them? Mia might enlighten him, if she'd ever learn to trust him. But why should she? He'd failed in getting her what she wanted most. The only thing he could give her was his letter.

Mia received him coolly when he arrived at her cell, holding out her hand for Kurt's letter. Instead of ripping it open she held it up, inhaling its smell. Intense relief appeared to flood over her, only then did she tear open the envelope. Sinking down on the bed she took in the contents. Joe craned his neck to see what he could as he set down his equipment. The writing was unrecognizable—symbols not resembling any language he was familiar with. Was it code? He wondered if he could get hold of it and decipher it somehow but moments later she tore it to shreds and took it to the bathroom, flushing it down the toilet. He closed his eyes to capture a picture of the symbols to later jot them down.

Joe had forgotten the flower, reaching down into the bag he came up with the rose. She stopped dead in her tracks as he held it out. "This is for you—from Kurt—it was supposed to go with the letter."

"Oh—thanks."

She just took it and set it on the desk, as if it meant nothing. A human woman might have shed a tear or smiled. Whether it struck an emotional chord was anybody's guess. It bothered Joe that this gesture left her cold or apparently cold after all the care and concern Kurt had shown. Somehow it bothered him more than how she'd attacked Rider.

Joe remained by the door, unsure of how to begin. She studied his face for a moment. "Guess we have a deal, Doctor."

He took out his notebook and took a seat. "I want you to tell me whatever you can, without embellishment, pertinent information on your behavior, without the sensationalism of your journal."

She laughed. "Vampire stories have to be sensational or they aren't much fun. It's a full-blown Gothic tale with dark corners and mysterious strangers. I'm afraid it's the only way I know."

"Be serious, I'm trying to help you."

"A girl can't survive in my racket if she's too serious. My *modus operandi* is to amuse. Two things at which I'm very accomplished—one is a witty

turn of phrase—the other I'll leave to the imagination. I know you have an *active* imagination.”

“Just answer my questions and I won't bother you any more.”

“But I find you so nice to look at.” The dark eyes gave him the once over, rosebud mouth parting slightly in a smile. “You don't like when I compliment you?”

A little stab started behind his eyes. “Just call me Joe. If we're going to work together, we should be on a first name basis. Don't you think so, Mia?”

The doll's mask became an evil pixie's. “You're right, *Youssef*. That *is* your real name?”

“Yes, *Maria*—that's your real name?”

“Demons in our past we'd rather forget. Yours hail from Teheran, apparently.”

“I was born there. How did you know?”

She settled in the armchair, drawing her legs under her in a little girl pose, like some centerfold. If this wasn't a demon from hell what was? All innocence, the prim little flower mouth, and eyes kind of lost and bewildered—it was an illusion. This *thing* was malignant.

“Dr. Youssef Ansari, creator of *The Enigma*, a revolutionary new kind of PET scan, the man who holds the key to the soul, so they say. I do my homework. Don't worry, your secrets are safe with me.”

“I'd like to start with a few simple questions I jotted down in regard to what I read in your notebook.” He removed the notes from his pocket. “You were very badly beaten that night?”

“You would ask.”

“Not personal details— just curious about the healing process of your body. Wounds heal fast?”

She shrugged. “Depends on how severe.”

“What was the most severe injury you’ve sustained?”

“Physically or spiritually?”

“Physically, of course.”

“Took a bullet in the shoulder. Took about a week to heal completely. Blood vessels closed off right away, but the hole was there awhile.”

“Did it hurt?”

She looked at him. “Of course. I feel pain.”

“I see.” He wrote this fact down then looked up again. “So after a severe beating you were able to regain consciousness in a very short time, but it left you struggling and in need of... uh... nourishment?”

“Blood?” She sneered. “Go on, you’re dying to ask. Who was he?”

“I’m not trying to dissect your personal experiences but I did wonder. It wasn’t Kurt?”

“Kurt? No. My master.”

“Master? He changed you?”

“That’s a whole other story.”

Joe abruptly changed subject. “Do you normally feel cold that intensely?”

“Not like mortals— but it was below zero and I’d lost a lot of blood. When he dumped me into that alley he sucked back a lot of what he’d given thirty-six years before. If he’d taken more I wouldn’t have regained consciousness

— just lain there until morning and *hasta la vista baby*. He wanted me to suffer before fate took care of me.”

Joe leaned forward. “Fate?”

“Survival is tricky. Consider the practicalities doctor. It’s vital I have a roof over my head at sunrise. I require clothes on my back. I need real food too — not just blood. So, I need money. Manhattan isn’t cheap. Ever tried to rent an apartment without identification or a bank account? No birth certificate, no driver’s license or social security card. Legally speaking, I didn’t exist. But that’s just the easy stuff. I also require additional *nourishment* every week to ten days. That’s a lot of corpses to get rid of. I have to dig shallow graves, dump them into rivers or cut them up into little pieces, all without being seen. Wouldn’t do to have New York’s finest snooping around. Still — that’s not the worst of it. Imagine a lone woman in the ancient world, no man to protect her — I’m fair game. I had to deal with my own kind and that’s always a delicate situation.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A girl on her own among that band of perverts and miscreants? Think about it. They follow whatever custom was fashionable in their time, or in the case of my contemporaries reject enlightened ways in favor of older ones. I’m mere chattel. I don’t have the benefit of laws to protect my rights. Technically, I’m discarded property. But I’m sure our quaint, old-fashioned customs are of no interest?”

“Behavior is often driven by biological predisposition.”

Her mouth twisted up. “Yeah, they’re human and they still act like it. Strip away the mantle of civilization and what’s there?”

“This pimp — is he typical of the sort of victims you seek out?”

“It’s easier to take down sleazoids. No one likes them or will miss them much. Besides, pimps are a favorite flavor of mine.”

Joe winced. “*Flavor*? We, that is to say, *human beings* have different flavors?”

“It’s vampire-speak, certain victims give a certain psychological release. Revenge is sweet Joe—but pimps are small game. My master trained me to seduce and kill powerful men, a fine art. I know all sorts of kinky tricks if you’re interested. In any case there’s more to it than sex. What’s most important is to pinpoint a man’s weakness and exploit it for all it’s worth. Luring a man to your bed is no great feat if you’re attractive—stealing his soul away—now there’s the prize.”

“I’m not much for metaphysics.”

Her bee-stung mouth twitched. “No, you’re the objective man of science. Neurons firing—biochemical transmitters—that’s the meaning of life.”

“Something like that.”

She chuckled. “Everything on a map with a key, but it’s not that simple, my friend.”

He changed the subject. “How long have you been... like this?”

“I can sit hear and answer questions till the bats come home or just tell you as it all happened, be your Sheherazade and beguile you for a thousand and one nights.”

“We don’t have that much time.”

“I have all the time in the world. Where shall I begin?”

“At the beginning would be a good place. How did you become a vampire?”

Mia began, “First off, we don’t refer to ourselves by that vulgar term. We prefer *Immortyl*, with a Y. Of course I could care less, call a spade a spade, I say...”

FOUR

* * * *

“Remember those three chicks in Dracula? His so-called *brides* who attack Harker? Ever wonder what their story was? How’d they end up there and what did they do with their considerable time? It wasn’t like he just flew into my bedroom window as a bat or something. There are circumstances leading up.

My parents emigrated from Italy in nineteen thirty. He was the son of a minor aristocrat and she was a servant. She was pregnant. He was an operatic tenor. Needless to say, they weren’t exactly well off. My mother died at my birth, and my father followed when I was eleven. After an abusive Catholic upbringing by my father’s spinster sister Selena, I ran off to Manhattan to become an actress.

Two years of pounding the pavement got me a break in a play directed by an acting teacher of mine, a married man who took me as his protegee and mistress. The play was Ibsen’s *Master Builder*. Not that that means a thing to you, Joe, but the antagonist Hilde is a dream part for a young actress, no simpering ingenue, but a first-class demon with the power to drive a man to his death. It’s a sexual power struggle between a young woman, Hilde, and the older titular character, Solness. At this point, I was barely aware of the awesome power of this primal force, but I was a quick learner.

I’ll never forget that nasty, rainy December night when I first met my fate. I was busy smearing cold cream on my face to remove my make up when the assistant stage manager knocked on the door of the dressing room I shared with two female cast members. I was always the last one out. This was my time to go over the performance mentally and analyze what had worked and what hadn’t, to retain anything new I’d found in the character.

“Hey Mia, some guy out in the lobby wants to meet you.”

The occasional audience member wanted to chat but most of these guys weren't really interested in my acting. Making a face in the mirror I called back, "Anyone important?"

"Never heard of him, but this one's created quite a stir with the female staff."

Well, that was different. Apparently, this one was a *looker*. What would be the harm? "Be right out. Let him into the green room," I hollered.

The first sight of him was if I'd been dealt a blow to the gut, a good sock right in the old breadbasket. I had to gasp for air. If a god walked on earth, surely this was one. And yet he looked vaguely familiar... The naughty boy had the audacity to take the form of my erotic fantasies. Gorgeous body, tall, strong, high cheekbones, straight flawlessly formed nose, firm and determined jaw, all crowned with a mass of thick, straight, coal black hair. But it was his eyes that ripped my heart out of my chest. They were blue, not the bright blue of cornflowers on a summer's day, or the soft blue of a robin's egg in spring, but the cold blue of frozen winter seas, almost white in their chilly brilliance, the irises surrounded by a thin black ring that caused them to stand out in stunning contrast to his lustrous midnight hair.

He smiled at me, arrogance in his full mouth. What a bad, bad boy! His expensive black suit hung on that six-four frame like it'd been placed there by a legion of devils out to enslave hapless females who crossed his path.

A long white manicured hand reached out to mine. I averted my eyes. The luster of this creature was too brilliant for mortal sight. Power emanated from him and I was drawn irresistibly— knees weak, dripping wet. My heart raced in my chest to keep up with the frantic pace of the intimate pictures forming in my brain.

I stole another glance. Icy eyes locked on mine and a most intriguing grin enlivened his hauteur. Recognition, something in my expression he liked.

When at last he spoke, I melted. His voice was deep and rich as a perfectly tuned cello, and to top it off a soft southern accent, infinitely pleasing in its highs and lows, warm and lazy as a summer breeze. "Miss Disantini? Very

pleased to make your acquaintance. I enjoyed your performance immensely. You have an extraordinary gift. I shall be keeping my eye on you.”

My mouth parted. I lost all sense of place and time, imprisoned like Merlin, rendered powerless in the crystalline ice caves of his eyes. Yet, in spite of the chill, there was heat in my veins. If he’d said come, I’d have gone—no question. I managed to summon my voice. “Thank you, Mr....”

A flush overcame me. My knees sagged. He caught my elbow and steadied me. The marble-hard hand was hot through the wool of my dress. His eyes mocked me as if they were used to young women swooning under their gaze. “Miss Disantini? Are you poorly?”

I lied of course. “Just a little tired after my performance.”

“Such a role requires great insight.” He sounded like he knew what he was talking about. “You’ve captured her spirit very well and that’s not an easy task.”

I was baffled by his knowledge. “You’re an actor?”

Well, he *looked* like a matinee idol. Cold eyes lit up and his face creased in merriment, he laughed, guffawed even, a rich rolling sound from deep within his chest.

“Miss Disantini, you’re a very charming young lady. Might I ask—”

He never finished the sentence because my lover, Richard, came into the Green Room, calling out to me impatiently. The beautiful stranger threw him a withering look.

I hated to tear myself away from this apparition of delight. “Master’s voice — gotta run.”

“Until we meet again Miss Disantini. A privilege.”

I half expected him to bend over and kiss my hand he was so very courtly and archaic, yet he merely gripped it firmly and then turned to go. I tingled

all over. Cast and crew parted like the Red Sea to let him pass, not one head topping his. I'd never seen anything like him. He positively *glittered*.

In the bedroom that night, I met Richard's caresses with a fervor that surprised us both, but it wasn't him I made love to. It was the dark one of my dreams.

The play had gotten me notice and I was asked to audition to replace another young actress in a Broadway hit. I would take over when my run ended in *The Master Builder*. My career was going along swimmingly. February of nineteen fifty, I turned twenty. Richard planned to take me out after the show for dinner, dancing and the whole nine yards. I splurged on a new evening dress, black satin, cut down to there. I felt sophisticated and devastatingly chic in it. The saleswoman assured me black was my color. I can't tell you how many times I've heard that.

What had become of my stranger? Probably squiring swan-necked debutantes in limousines, drinking champagne from their slippers and that bullshit, I assured myself. He looked like he had a pedigree worthy of the royal family. What could he possibly want with a five-foot-two daughter of immigrants?

After the show, I sat at the dressing table as was my habit, going over the play, humming and removing makeup, when Richard rushed into the room in a fluster. His wife had decided to attend the performance with some friends. He ran off to intercept them while I wiped the last traces of make up away. My face looked pale and oh so very young. Who was I? Some little wop from Brooklyn he'd picked up from his acting class. She was older, rich and for-god-sakes married to him.

The door opened and they piled in, three women and two men besides Richard. The women all had that look, polished and expensive, like yachts. The youngest was about forty, tall, blonde and if not beautiful, elegant. Katherine was hardly the gorgon I'd expected.

She cooed over me. "Isn't she just adorable? Where did you find that destructive streak, darling? We should all watch out for her." The others tittered. "Of course, Richard always has a knack for spotting *young talent*."

Her subtext was clear. She knew. I wasn't the first; she'd been through it all before. It was clearly a warning for me to stay put in my proper place. It was like I'd swallowed a baseball, one with the sawdust leaking out. My eyes started to tear up as I bit my lip.

A smug smile fluttered over Katherine's face. "Come Richard, we've reservations at Twenty One. Goodbye Miss Disantini— good luck on the rest of your *run*."

She didn't mean the play, I assure you. I waited until they'd gone before I put my head down on the dressing table and cried. He'd never leave her for me. I was a naive little fool to believe it. After this catharsis, I was hell-bent on revenge and wished for some way of getting back at Richard. As I always say, be careful what you wish for...

My tears dried, I put on my new clothes intending to join my friends at Salvi's. I left the theatre and stood on the corner waiting for the light to change. Then, like some genie, he materialized before me on the sidewalk. My prayers were answered, but by whom I'll never know, because it was him, my beautiful stranger, six-four of him towering over me. I shivered over his sheer size, again I felt faint. He was as foreign to my Italian-American sensibilities as an extra terrestrial, the antithesis of everything I was. Boy, how opposites can attract.

He spoke in that gorgeous drawl, "Miss Disantini! I looked in on your performance again but I'm afraid I was unable to speak with you. The stagehand told me you were otherwise engaged. I do apologize."

I tried to sound casual. As if I could really fool *him*. "Oh, it's you, Mr?"

"Sinclair." *Sin-cleah*. I might have died, definitely not from my neighborhood. "Are you on your way somewhere?"

Some-wheah, he says and I'm melting like honey over hot biscuits. I milked it for all it was worth. "Home." I snifflled for effect. "Plans kinda fell through."

He suppressed a smile, obviously not overwhelmed by my tragic performance. “Delightful—I mean for me. May I invite you for supper?”

Suppah, breakfast, anywheah.

“Lovely, may I suggest a place?” My, I was being bold but my wish required being seen.

“Of course, I intended to ask for your recommendation.”

So-o-o accommodating. I wanted to accommodate him right then and there. “Well, it’s probably not what you’re used to—but the food is great, real Italian. It’s just right around the corner,” I said, longing to show him some real Italian cooking straight through to dessert.

Knowing I was up to something, he offered his arm. “Lead on, Miss Disantini...”

And off we went on a little date with destiny...

Salvi’s was crowded and noisy, one of those great little places with tacky paintings of the Italian countryside on the wall and signed photographs of celebrities. My glossy was displayed along with the rest. Mr. Salvi had a soft spot for me. My friends were seated at their regular table trading insults and witticisms, imbibing vast quantities of cheap Chianti. I waved to them. They applauded and whistled. We were duly noted.

Mr. Salvi, a short rotund man in his sixties with a perpetually red face hustled up. He greeted me, kissing my cheeks, “Ah Miss Mia, the prettiest little girl in New York!”

I planted a big smack on his lips. “Howya doin’ Mr. Salvi?”

“Can’t complain, business is good and you’re here. Will you be joining your friends?”

I grinned back and winked. “Table for two, if you please.”

He nudged me in the ribs. “Nice young man, eh? Much better for a young lady, yes?”

I replied in an exaggerated stage whisper, “I’m inclined to agree with you.”

My companion cast a sidelong glance at me. All part of the show, but I was playing in earnest tonight. I’d actually forgotten Richard for a moment. Present company was beyond thrilling.

We made our way through the maze of crowded little tables. He helped me into my chair. Lovely manners, of course good manners were more common back then but his were always impeccable. When he took his seat he leaned over the table to me and said in a sort of low growl, “Am I being used, Miss Disantini?”

I grinned back. “You’re on to me Mr. Sinclair.” Oh, Mr. Sinclair with an accent on the *sin*.

“I saw your... *friend*, leaving with... the others.”

“His wife. Shocked?” This was nineteen fifty.

Didn’t even blink an eye. “I’m a man of the world, Miss Disantini. May I call you Maria?”

“No one ever called me that except for my dried up maiden aunt. Call me, Mia.”

An amazingly liquid smile flowed over his lips. “*Va bene, cara mia.*”

I blinked, surprised he used the endearment my father did and even more that he pronounced it so beautifully. “You speak Italian?”

“I speak many languages.”

The waiter approached us to take our order.

“Hiya Mikey. What’s good tonight?”

He was one of those waiters who's extremely competent but always looks like his dog just died. Never wrote anything down but never made a mistake either. "Calamari's good; veal's better."

I took the safer option. One could never tell how a gentleman would react to a girl eating squid. "The veal, please."

"And the gentleman?"

The smooth smile never left my companion's face and frosty eyes never left mine. "Nothing thank you, I dined earlier. Please bring the young lady whatever she wants."

"You'll be sorry. Bring the lot Mikey! Mussels to start and a basket of bread, I'm starved. And the best red you've got. He's paying!" I pointed to my amused date.

Mikey hurried away. My companion still had his eyes glued to me awaiting my next move, mouth twitching with unexpressed laughter. In spite of the hauteur, he had a sense of humor. "You're very straightforward."

"You're rich, aren't you?"

Didn't miss a beat, leaning in to me, grinning in a wolfish way.
"Fabulously."

I continued on my merry way. "Music to my ears, listen you don't have a wife do you?"

He laughed at my gaucherie. "No."

Angels were singing somewhere. "You're getting better by the minute. I can't believe you're single!"

"I was married once. She died long ago."

Open mouth insert foot, Mia. "Sorry, didn't mean to be so rude. I always say just what I think. It's a bad habit."

“Your candor is refreshing,” he said with a touch of world-weariness.

Ooh! What made him tick? Yet undiscovered levels to his character. *Tres* sophisticated. Our eyes met. Was my mouth watering?

The piano player started to play soft dinner music. Usually as the night wore on he’d play show tunes or Italian songs and guests would sing along.

“What’s your first name?”

“Ethan— Ethan Allen Sinclair.”

I actually sighed, “Ethan Allen Sinclair— sounds like a character from a book— can’t say I’ve ever met an Ethan before.”

“I’ve never met a Mia before. It’s a delicious experience.”

Oh, he was good, but it didn’t matter. I was falling anyway. I blushed.

“Where in the universe did you drop from?” If he’d said Alpha Centauri it wouldn’t have surprised me.

“Virginia.”

“Old money?”

A mysterious smile slid over his luscious mouth. “Very old.”

“You have that look. Why Ethan Allen, I mean, wasn’t he a *Yankee*?”

He chuckled. “My father asked my mother that same question the day I was born. She thought an unusual name lent distinction.”

“Why me?”

A puzzled look passed briefly over his face. “Whatever do you mean?”

I gestured to a colleague of mine, a tall, blonde gazelle of a girl. “Why not my friend Janie over there? She’s the real beauty.”

He paused for a moment, smiling. “*You exceed her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December.*”

“*Much Ado about Nothing.* You know your Shakespeare.”

“I read extensively. I’m particularly fond of Shakespeare.”

“Not just a pretty face?”

“I hope not.”

“And it *is* a very pretty face.”

Large eyes widened and blinked in surprise. I actually upset his considerable composure. “I suppose I should thank you for the compliment, but I can’t say I’d agree with your choice of adjective.”

“Handsome doesn’t really say it, does it?”

Beautiful would only begin to describe him.

He laughed again. “It’ll do. Thank you.”

I stretched out my hand to him. Again he looked slightly surprised and amused yet took it in his. “I like your face very much.” He stroked the palm of my hand.

“Cute.” I grimaced. “That’s what they say.”

“Leonardo might have painted this face, pure in its lineaments, eyes that tantalize with secrets.”

“Quit, you’ll turn my head,” I said imitating his accent.

His eyes moved lovingly over my face. “That, my dear Miss Disantini, is my motive.”

I was taken aback. He had me at the disadvantage and it was so delicious. I tried to remove my hand but he hung on. Something happened in that

moment. The attraction went beyond the realm of the physical. I broke that lovely silence because I feared to hold his gaze another second. “Where the heck is my food?” But I was lost. I’d fallen with a resounding thud.

The piano player struck up a show tune. My friends sang along loudly. Ethan looked over at them. “Your fellow thespians?”

I grimaced. “They’ve had a few by now.”

Suddenly Burt, the delightfully bitchy old queen who played Solness rushed over to the table. “Sing, Baby Bird. Warble a song for your lovely young man.”

I was embarrassed. Sometimes I’d get up to sing, but I was sure I couldn’t manage a note. He took me by the arm, announcing to the entire restaurant, “It’s her birthday!”

The piano crescendoed into *Happy Birthday* and everyone joined in. I was red-faced. Ethan just sat back and enjoyed my discomfort. “Happy Birthday, Mia.”

“Come on Baby, let’s have that song,” Burt cajoled.

Applause started up.

I shook my head. “No, please. I can’t.”

Ethan leaned back, crossing his arms over that impressive chest. “I’d be honored if you would sing, Mia.”

“Theah, mustn’t disappoint your handsome new beau, dawlin,” drawled Burt, in an outrageous parody of Ethan’s accent as he dragged me off to the piano.

He nodded to the piano player. “*A Kiss to Build a Dream On.*”

I was shaking as the pianist played the intro in my key. My voice came out as a breathy whisper. I looked over to Ethan, who’d leaned forward smiling. My confidence returned and I set out to seduce him with the song.

I finished to more applause. Taking a bow, I rejoined Ethan at the table just as Mikey hustled up with my first course.

Ethan took my hand. “Enchanting, perfectly enchanting.”

“My father was an opera singer. He taught me when I was young, but my voice is just a light, little thing.”

“Clear and pleasing as a silver bell. A man could be driven to his destruction by a sweet siren such as you.”

I laughed. “You’re too kind.”

Mikey placed a soup plate piled high with mussels and a large basket of freshly baked bread before me. I sniffed in appreciation.

Ethan gave me that slow lazy smile. “You appreciate the pleasures of the table.”

What an odd way to put it. He had this strange, pretty way of talking. Even if it was just a line I took the bait eagerly. As I dug into the first course, Ethan observed me carefully, like he’d never seen a girl eat before.

“Are you sure you won’t have anything?” I asked.

His eyes glittered giving away no secrets. “No thank you, I’ll just sit here and watch you. That’s a veritable bed of mussels. I do hope you have a healthy appetite.”

“Voracious, I’ll be fat someday if I’m not careful,” I said, as I speared a mussel with my fork and shoved it in my mouth. Mmm, garlic, wine and the slightly iodine taste of the sea exploded in my mouth.

“I don’t see any danger of that.” His eyes gave me the once over then rested on my low cut bodice. “Girls today are too skinny, if you ask me.”

I swallowed. “So you like your ladies with a little meat on their bones?”

“It depends on where you’re talking about,” he said, with that little growl.

I leaned over and inquired slyly, “How do I measure up?”

He laughed, glittering eyes fixing on mine. “I wouldn’t be a gentleman if I answered that question the way I’d like.”

“I think you’re a rogue at heart.”

“And do you like rogues?”

“If they’re handsome ones.”

He burst out laughing again as he leaned back in the chair. “There’s a bit of the rogue in you too, isn’t there?”

“Promise not to tell?” I winked. “Won’t you at least have some wine?”

He looked longingly at my glass. “I’m afraid I must abstain,” he said, regretfully.

Interesting, he didn’t look like a teetotaler. I certainly hoped he wasn’t an alcoholic. My, wasn’t I in for a surprise? I began to eat again while he looked on. It was making me very uncomfortable to be scrutinized so. I set down my fork and burst out, “Well, if I’m going to sit here and eat in front of you, you have to tell me something about yourself.”

He seemed a bit taken aback but replied graciously, “There isn’t really much to tell.”

“Oh come on, you’re one great big enigma, like some mysterious gothic hero. I just know you have a past. What skeletons are lurking in the family closet? Do you have a mad brother locked away in the attic?”

He smiled slowly. “Nothing like that, I assure you. However, there’s one thing you might find interesting. I’m restoring my family estate in Virginia. They lost it after the war.”

“Which war?”

He looked vague for a moment, then replied, “The Civil War, as you call it up here.”

“Personally, I never saw anything particularly civil about a war.”

He smiled at my joke. “I’m sure you know what befell many southern families during reconstruction. They couldn’t keep up the taxes and debts and so on. Thankfully the family fortunes revived later. The estate is called *Caithness*, after the Sinclair family seat in Scotland. The house was in ruins when I acquired it. That was ten years ago—it’s nearly finished. You should see.”

Was that an invitation? It had the ring of one. “Is it one of those great big white houses with the columns?” I had stopped eating and leaned my cheek against my hand.

“It’s red brick and a bit smaller than those antebellum palaces you see in the movies, built in the Georgian period. I’ve been in New York hunting suitable antiques. Some of the old pieces were salvageable, but many were beyond redemption. I’m not boring you?”

Not a chance, I could have stared at him forever but a warm, drowsy feeling had come over me. His face became animated, where before his manner had been so composed. He had tremendous feeling for this house. Touching. Still I caught a whiff of desperation. Just what was it about him? Something indefinable.

“Not at all,” I replied. “This place has great meaning for you. It gives you a sense of your history.”

He was surprised by my response. “You understand.”

Our eyes met again. I wasn’t quite up to the challenge and changed the subject. “I’ve a bit of history myself.”

“Do tell.”

“After you, I’ve got two more courses.”

“You do have a healthy appetite,” he said, observing the nearly empty plate before me. His blue eyes narrowed, as he rested that chin on his hand. “Are all of your *appetites* this prodigious?”

I aped his drawl, “Now you *aren’t* being a gentleman Mistah Sinclair.”

“But you like me better for it, don’t you?”

“You’re a very bad boy, I think.”

He ran his finger along the bottom of his lower lip. “That, my dear Miss Disantini, remains to be seen.”

The waiter placed my entree before me. Mr. Salvi must have been convinced I was truly starving and ordered the chef to double my portion. Ethan laughed at my amazed expression. “Are you up to it?”

I observed the mound of food on the plate. “I begin to doubt myself.”

“The Bird of Prey?”

“Huh? Oh, the play. That’s just acting.”

“You have a bit of the bird of prey in you as well. You’re sinking your little talons into me—not that I mind in the least. But I must warn you—you haven’t met such prey as me before.”

I watched him furtively between bites. Oh, he was very easy on the eyes but there was something odd about his looks. He was *inhumanly* beautiful. Hair too glossy black, eyes too icy blue—he looked about thirty-five but didn’t have the tiniest lines, smooth and pore-less as a young boy and although very fair, not pale or unhealthy looking, rich red color infusing his skin and lips. Like some celluloid image from Hollywood, he was just too much of everything to be true.

Still there was something else—in the glitter of the ice blue eyes, in the precise control of his movements, so different than anyone I’d ever seen, but not just because of his background. Something under this disciplined and elegant exterior, maybe the posture of his powerful frame, or the

arrogant set of his full mouth spoke savagery. Danger. Somewhere in the dark corners we'd met before... ”

Joe stifled a laugh. “The gothic stuff... really Mia.”

“It's all true. He was all that. Ethan was unlike anyone else.”

“And of course you fell madly in love with him?”

“*Madly*... yes, it was like madness... ” I must have been sitting there for awhile with my mouth hanging open, because he waved a hand in front of my eyes.

“Are you still here, Mia? You must tell your story.”

I related my history while he listened intently.

“He appraised me with the air of a connoisseur. “You've a European flair. Women of your nationality have a certain, *vitality*, about them, very attractive.”

I shook my finger at him. “You know every trick in the book, don't you? I'm on to you.”

“How can one seduce a charming young lady when she's equally adept?”

I lowered my eyes demurely. “I'm no siren. I'm just a little girl who does some acting.”

“You're totally aware of the powers you possess, but if the innocent pose amuses you, retain it by all means. It only adds to your appeal— beguiling little bird of prey.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I hope I don't bear too strong of a resemblance to that little monster.”

He leaned over to me and looked me in the eye. “You have potential you don't yet realize. When I first saw you onstage you captivated me. I was amazed that some little *ingénue* could wield so much power. There's much

more to you than meets the eye, but the vision before me is most pleasing, I must say.”

He knew me too well, studying me as if I were a new species he’d discovered, and this infuriating attitude was driving me mad for him.

“Continue,” he ordered.

Well, how do you like that, already telling me what to do? I looked up in surprise at his imperturbable icy gaze. Not someone you’d want to displease. Mmm, I liked him even better.

I went on. He listened, nodding his head on occasion. Then he inquired about Aunt Selena’s whereabouts.

“No idea. Hope she croaked, the old bat.”

He threw his head back, laughing out loud. People turned around and stared. He didn’t care in the least. “You’re a scamp, Mia!”

“Selena would call me a lot worse,” I said. “After a party at Richard’s place I auditioned for my other role. I’ve been playing in repertory ever since. There you have it, Maria Michaela Paola Disantini’s fall from grace.”

Ethan grasped my hands. “You deserve better, Mia.” I looked up to the most determined stare I’d ever seen. Strong fingers caressed my wrists, running rhythmically over the veins. “End it.”

The entire place went quiet. I was barely aware of people around us. Far off, dishes and glassware clinked, music played but I was removed from it all. Ethan made everything fade into insignificance. He’d spoken of being captivated by my performance. Then what was this he was doing to me? He touched my wrist to his mouth and to my surprise, licked it. Man, was I hot now. Two pinpoints of blue-white light bore into me like twin lasers.

“You’re worthy of great love, far more than that bloodless thing can give you. No broken promises. Isn’t that what you really want, Mia?”

I wanted nothing more than those parted lips all over my body. “Ye-s-s-s.”

“I will stop at nothing until you are mine.” He gripped my wrists so tightly I thought they’d break.

“You’re hurting me,” I gasped, trying to wrest my hands from his grip.

“I won’t be trifled with. You *will* let him go.”

A flame burned in those regions of ice. His lip curled back. I could’ve sworn he was fanged, his face taking on the predatory snarl of a panther, dark and lethal. My body prepared the way for him, weakness about the knees, wetness, nipples insinuating themselves through the black satin of my dress, heart pumping furiously.

“Yes-s-s,” I answered, panting.

“Don’t disappoint me.”

He released me. The room kind of shifted sideways, leaving me dizzy and nauseous. “Oh God,” I groaned, sinking to the table, holding my head between my hands.

“What is it?”

“Too much wine. Please take me home,” I pleaded.

“Yes, of course.” He helped me to my feet. My high spiked heels wobbled a little, so he took my elbow and steadied me, wrapping his other arm around my bare shoulders. The place was nearly empty, still I was embarrassed, struggling to regain composure and walk out on my own power. Ethan retrieved my wrap and placed it around me, leading me outside. Once the cold air hit, I was better. Ethan hailed a cab and we piled inside.

“Feeling better?”

The abrupt change in character bewildered me. The panther exited and the gracious southern gentleman re-entered, but I sensed the predator waiting in the wings to spring. I turned, hoping to draw the gorgeous animal out again. “My old self again— tad warm in there.”

He didn't make a move. He just sat there quietly, a mysterious little smile on that beautiful visage. Fully aware of the effect he had on me, yet patiently biding his time. What a tease.

My place was deserted when we got there, so I invited him in. He told me he couldn't stay long. It was late. I'd used that excuse myself before, but this time I was the one hoping for more than a good night kiss, and although I look a lot like her, I'd made it clear I wasn't Snow White.

I switched the lamp on, hanging my wrap carelessly on the back of the chair. Knowing I looked pretty tasty in the black satin, I sashayed over to him. From his lofty height, he smiled benevolently, a god on a mere mortal, and I approached to make a burnt offering of myself. Pure white Carrera marble, the cool planes of that face. But his chilly appearance was deceiving. As I pressed my body along his length, an inferno rose deep within, contained with exquisite control. Mmmm, he was hard and hot *all over*. I wrapped my arms around and tried to draw the fire into myself, but he touched me as if he were afraid I'd shatter to bits, taking reverential care as he placed his long warm fingers on my shoulders, only one elegant, teasing digit straying to stroke my decolletage.

"I must go back home for a while. I will return in April for you. Get rid of that leech."

I cried out as his finger teased my nipple. "Yes-s-s, of course. I can't stand him anymore."

"A bird of prey requires a master falconer."

I'll stop at nothing until you're mine.

That ardent promise, which in retrospect, sounded an awful lot like a threat, drained me of resistance. I was pulled in his orbit, a helpless satellite, Callisto to his Jupiter. He picked me up in those arms like a child, small, helpless, utterly trusting, and laid me down on the sofa, kneeling by my side, tongue tracing a moist, warm path from collarbone to ear as he lowered my dress over my shoulders and breasts.

“Kiss me!”

“*A kiss to build a dream on,*” he murmured, burying his face in my neck.

A jab of pain, like a pinprick stabbed into my neck and then oblivion... ”

Joe asked, impatiently, “So, that’s when he did it?”

She shook her head. “Wouldja let me tell this the way I want?”

FIVE

* * * *

“Next morning, I found myself on the sofa still clothed, tingling all over. If we didn’t make love, then I must have had the most incredible erotic dream.

Richard called, apologetic, begging me to join him for lunch at his place. He obviously planned on me as the entree and I didn’t want to go, but Ethan had ordered me to break it off as soon as possible.

Richard fell to his knees and begged, burying his head in my bosom, his fingers maggots crawling over my flesh. I extracted myself from his arms and left—but he wasn’t quite finished with me.

Ethan called from time to time and sent huge bouquets every day to my dressing room, the cards addressed to his “*Bird of Prey*.” Then, right before Ethan was due back, Richard got his revenge.

I awakened one morning, a few days before our last performance, very sick. I got up from bed, stomach flipping over, and ran to the bathroom to retch into the toilet. A cold sweat broke out as I sank to the floor, head between my knees. My period was almost two weeks late and I was always like clockwork. Now I *had* to call Richard. He agreed to meet me after the show that night. I didn’t tell why I wanted to see him. I really hoped I was wrong, but I was very scared.

At the theatre, I threw up again in the bathroom. Another actress ran to call the stage manager, a thin, intense, dark-haired man with a cigarette perpetually glued to his lips. The curtain was held for fifteen minutes. When we finally went up, I had difficulty concentrating. It was everything I could do to keep from running off stage to vomit again. I struggled to finish the show. As I sat removing my make-up afterward, there was a knock at my dressing room door.

“Mia, your friend is here,” called the ASM. “In the green room.”

Ethan! I was overjoyed, until I remembered the new twist in the plot. I had to see him, even if it might be for the last time. Tears welled up, as I ran to the green room.

A vision glittered before me, dressed in impeccable evening clothes. As he held his arms out the floor gave way. He stepped forward to catch me, carrying me to the small beat-up leather sofa against the wall. Laying me down tenderly on it, Ethan felt my pulse and laid his hand against my abdomen. Voices buzzed and someone went to fetch a glass of water. Ethan waved them all away. “Leave us,” he growled. Naked despair swam in Ethan’s eyes when I looked up at him. “How long have you been in this condition?”

“A few weeks maybe.”

“Anything I can do to assist you?”

I cried into his crisp white shirt. “You promised nothing would keep you from me.”

“Best I let you go now. I’m sorry but I must.” He caressed my hair.

I pulled away and rubbed at my eyes, sniffling. “I understand. It isn’t your responsibility. It’s Richard’s kid.”

Ethan frowned. “Have you told him?”

“Not yet.”

He reached into his coat, pulling out a black leather card case. He took out a card. “You can reach me here should you need assistance. I deeply regret things didn’t work out as we planned. Please—call if you need me.”

Kissing my forehead, he rose, leaving me desperate.

Richard met me outside in his car with an amused expression on his face, enjoying my dilemma too much. He wrapped himself around me, exhaling a solution mixed with cigarette smoke into my face. “Get rid of it.”

My Catholic conscience recoiled in horror. “It’s murder!”

He went on smoking as I stared out the window at the passing traffic on the narrow street. “Fine, go to some home and give it up. You can kiss your career and your southerner goodbye, or you tell him it was a false alarm. I go on living on Katherine’s money. Everyone’s happy. What you wouldn’t do to feed your ambition—a role on Broadway and a rich pretty boy on the side. I’ll even pay for it, as long as you promise to keep your big Italian mouth shut.”

I couldn’t carry to term the child of a man I hated. No tender maternal instincts for this tiny monster feeding on my blood. I had to be free to join my Ethan. Demons howled at the windows calling me to dance with them. I let them in and opened my arms wide.

I lay there in misery, raw and bleeding afterward. I hated Richard for doing this to me, and how I hated myself. This was punishment for my sins. I was in hell. Selena was right again. They took Richard’s money and pushed me out the door. Richard walked me to the car and helped me inside. I couldn’t lift my legs, slabs of dead meat. He lifted my feet into the car. I must’ve passed out, because next thing I knew we were pulling up outside my building.

The cramps were worse. I couldn’t rid myself of the feeling something had gone horribly wrong. He came around to my door and opened it. His eyes were cold gray disks. One of us had successfully distanced himself from the act. He got me to my feet. I stood on the sidewalk, blinking, disoriented. It was late afternoon. That mood of that long-ago Greenwich Village street was relatively serene. Waning spring sun bathed stone buildings in rosy gold light. Branches of still bare trees trembled gently in the breeze. The cerulean sky was dotted with fluffy white pompons of cumulous clouds. At the corner store, buckets of multi-colored blooms burned brilliant as a Van Gogh. I’ve fixed that moment firmly into my memory. I wish I’d stayed there for just a moment longer.

The climb to my third floor walk-up nearly did me in. Cursing, Richard finally lifted and carried me the rest of the way. Depositing me on my twin bed, he tucked a pillow under my feet and covered me with a blanket. “Try to sleep.”

I awoke alone in the dark. My head ached horribly with a sound like blood rushing through it. Warm stickiness ran between my thighs, running and running, soaking the bed linens. Something was wrong. I tried to sit up. My head swam. Nausea overcame me, the cramping unbearable. Where was Richard, the sonofabitch? I shouldn't have been bleeding this much. It was suddenly, sickeningly evident my womb was gushing from the spot where the thing we'd made had been ripped. I was bleeding to death.

I struggled to roll over and grab the receiver of phone on the night table next to the bed. With shaking, chilled fingers I dialed Richard's number. It rang for an eternity.

I fumbled for the white card with Ethan's number on it. Somehow, I dialed the phone again. It rang and rang, until he picked up. "Yes?"

"Ethan, it's Mia. I'm bleeding— help me."

The phone slipped through my fingers as I sank to the mattress in terror, unable to move from the spot. A cold, black hurricane swirled in around me. I cried for help silently, my voice not obeying my will.

Then a presence filled the room. A large, warm hand soothed my forehead, smoothing the damp hair back. I floated above the bed. I figured I must be dying, because I hovered, suspended in mid-air about to be borne off to the afterlife. But was I in the arms of an angel or a demon? It couldn't be an angel, not after what I'd just done.

Through the fog of my semi-conscious state a voice flowed— rich and melodious— the voice of an outraged, avenging angel. His warmth enveloped me, staving off the creeping chill paralyzing my limbs. I struggled to open my eyes. Two frosty orbs of blue light looked down. I cried. He calmed me, kissing my forehead. "Hush now, rest my little broken bird."

I clung to him with what strength I had left. "Ethan— I'm so scared!"

"You're dying, little one."

“Don’t let me die! I killed my baby. I’ll go to hell!”

“Hush, you’re not going anywhere without me. Did he force you to do this?”

Tears rolled down my face, as I confessed, “I wanted you so desperately.”

His voice took on this note of urgency, “Understand what I’m about to offer. It’s not something to be taken lightly.” I shivered. He held me closer.

“Think Mia, before you choose. We haven’t much time, but you must do this with the awareness of what we’re undertaking. You know what a vampire is?”

Why on earth was he asking me this ridiculous question? I reached in and pulled a name from the file drawer of my memory, a Hollywood icon. “Like Dracula?”

“A fairy story, Mia, look at me!” I opened my eyes wide and beheld the wonder he was. He spoke gently, not as forcefully like in the restaurant. “I’m what some call a vampire, but I’m a living, breathing creature—not a foul animated corpse. Immortal. I want you to become like me. You’ll never suffer from illness and remain young forever. But there’s a price, *cara mia*.”

I was still reeling, telling myself this must be a nightmare. “Drink blood?”

“We take the life force so we may live eternally. Are you willing to do this, to kill and drink the blood of living human beings to survive? Are you ready to accept this and join me forever?”

Intellectually, I understood what he was saying but I was motivated purely by the flesh. “Would you stay with me?”

“You’ll be mine forever, to love and protect.” Then he said the most extraordinary thing. “I need you so, Mia.”

Well, that was all he needed to say. I was so terrified of being left alone and dying that his promise was the ultimate seduction. Eternity with that beautiful being? You gotta be kidding if you think I hesitated for a moment.

Taking great care not to jostle me, he laid me down on the bed and eased his body next to mine. The smooth swell of his perfect mouth met mine; rapture to finally be in his embrace, whatever the cost. Suddenly, his hands and mouth were all over me as he stripped the blood-soaked clothing from my torn body and licked me all over like an animal that's given birth. The delicious sweep of that warm, wet tongue aroused in spite of the chill overtaking my body. He panted and shuddered, tearing off his clothes as he licked. Boy oh boy, the splendor of that incredible form, smooth, white and spectacularly *hard*. He gashed his throat. Drops of the old delicious claret beaded up along the edge of the wound. My body screamed for it.

Cradling my head in his hands, he guided my mouth to the wound. Heat radiated against my lips. Wonder of wonders, a vampire not cold like death, but so warm, so alive. *Boom, boom*, his heartbeat was strong and vital. He tasted of the sea, the source of life. I sucked and sucked, couldn't stop myself if I tried, even though it was sickeningly hot and syrupy.

Then, a popping sensation started, a tingle in my flesh, goose bumps on the inside of my body, rushing through my veins and arteries. I actually felt my cells changing and healing.

The bleeding in my womb was stanchéd. It would never bleed again. A sharp metallic scent filled the air. Then, it happened, the moment of creation, an electric pulse galvanized my cells and gave birth to the vampiric. New awareness came over my awakened senses. No smell, no taste, and no texture you sense as a mortal ever comes close to the pure sensual, animal glory of the world we experience.

Ethan's fangs drove into my wrist, an exquisite, hot pain. A climax rocked my body— ten times stronger than anything I ever experienced with Richard. All conscious thought evaporated. All that existed was he and I and the blood passing between us. Light blazed white-hot in him, around him and I rushed toward it headlong. It was the beautiful dreamtime state I couldn't remember that first night with him. Sensations invaded me, desire, joy, glimpses of heaven inside of the demon, then in the shadowy edges of his consciousness, something veiled... ”

Joe stood up suddenly and rubbed his hand agitatedly against his forehead.
“Whoa, now I have a few questions.”

She swallowed hard. “Whatever you want to know, Doctor.”

“You actually felt your body *change*? ”

“Like a million orgasms all over and inside of my body— alternately horrifying and beautiful, ecstasy from the inside out.”

“You’re some kind of empaths? You actually see inside of the psyche?”

The line of questioning irritated her. “It’s different for everyone, but it’s not so much something you perceive intellectually so much as something you feel reverberating through you. Sometimes I remember distinctly, other times... ”

“You have some unique ability in this way?”

“I can see a lot more than most, but only if the other is unguarded. When someone keeps a demon very close, it’s locked inside the subconscious and the only way you can see is if they are unaware, like when they’re asleep or otherwise preoccupied, like really horny.”

“Doesn’t seem possible.”

She became very still. Was a tempest brewing? He watched for it yet her response was surprisingly clear and her tone ladylike.

“I’m sure you’ll find it’s just some biochemical magic. Can’t you just smell the Nobel Prize?”

Standing in front of her place at the desk, he continued to marvel, “This is incredible! I thought it was all about strength and agility, sensory apparatus, but a way to see into the mind... ”

“I don’t read minds.” She searched for the right words. “I... feel impressions of their memory. I’m told it’s almost exclusively a female trait and rare at that.”

He met her eyes. Dark mirrors glittered silently back. Before he couldn't hold her gaze for long, but he was unable to turn away now. "Incredible."

"There's a down side. Think about it."

"I can't stop thinking! There's so much I want to know. You perceive actual images?"

"Sometimes it's a scenario, a real cast of characters and setting and all, other times it's much cloudier. This first time, he was full of blinding light... but he was hiding."

"How could you tell?"

She shrugged. "That's how I remember it, like I was watching him on television. Suddenly the monitor went blank. When the picture came back, he'd switched the channel, new program."

"Did it reveal anything about him?"

"That he had a lot to hide. I just didn't know what. Eventually, I got around to figuring it out. Jungian psychoanalyst, that's me. Dreams read and revealed, see the truth as it unfolds in gory Technicolor."

"There's a biochemical reason for dreams and for this— what do you call it?"

"Sharing essence."

"Apparently there's a chemical message sent to your brain via the blood exchange. Somehow messages from the brain of your partner are relayed to yours. Possibly the cerebral cortex is stimulated. The brains of syphilitics are sometimes tormented by spirochetes long after they are cured of the actual symptoms of the disease. They hallucinate, experience heightened sexual desire but I'm inclined to think your dream centers are stimulated. Push the right buttons in the brain and you can get all kinds of weird responses. The question is, what component in the blood carries this message to the brain, and so rapidly?"

She mulled over this idea. Someone had taught her a little science. Her vocabulary revealed that. “How can it help us, or you, for that matter?”

“Anything that helps us to understand the function of your brain is important. Clearly if you’re decapitated, you die. Obviously the brain is vital to your survival. It’s perhaps the source of your immortality. Other parts of your body can be injured and heal rapidly but not the brain from what you’ve said. Why not? This is something we need to find out. Also how does the brain control your behavior? The brain is like a computer, hardwired to perform specific tasks in a specific manner, some believe from birth, but other evidence points to crucial windows of development open to stimulation in the first years of life to form the neurons vital to normal human behavior and intelligence. However we’ve also observed individuals suffering severe injuries being able to regain functions that should have been lost because other areas of the brain have taken over the work, indicating that maybe the hard wiring isn’t so hard and fast. The question for you seems to be where has the wiring been switched and where has it stayed the same.”

A tantalizing smile appeared on her moist lips. “You make me sound like a machine, not a creature of flesh and blood.”

He looked at her, all too flesh and blood for his comfort. “It’s just a way of looking at things. We’ve been accused of reducing the soul to a circuit board.”

One feathery dark brow inched up. “What do you believe, Joe?”

He was taken aback. Just what did he believe? Was there a soul beyond the firing of the neurons? He couldn’t believe in anything he couldn’t explain, going through the motions of religion not to offend his family, but he didn’t really believe in God or an immortal soul. Still, what made an individual unique and human? That was certainly some kind of a soul. “I’m not really sure,” he admitted.

“Only way to find out. Beats sex a hundred to one. Tempted to be my partner in joy?”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Let’s make it a standing invitation.” A secretive little smile twitched the corners of her mouth. “Shall I continue?”

Joe nodded and resumed his seat.

“The intensity grew to be too much, we pulled apart, gasping with pleasure as we collapsed panting on the bed, our bodies wet with perspiration, barely touching but very aware of the other next to it. Then Ethan pulled over me and slid into my...”

Joe spoke up, “We can skip the next part.”

“Jesus! Well, just let me say this, my darling doctor, no mortal male can compare, for sheer endurance or intensity, and Ethan was unbelievably skilled on top of that. There’s no human equivalent.”

“Then why bother with mortals?”

“Blood is *everything* with mortals.” She leaned forward, provocatively. “Unless of course we see our own qualities inherent in them... Well, the honeymoon was off to an arousing start. Honeymoons, however, have this habit of ending much too soon.”

Joe interrupted her again, “How old was he exactly?”

“As a mortal, he fought as a cavalry officer with Stuart and then became a confederate spy. Quite a *history* but I didn’t learn much about it until later. At this point, it only served to romanticize him.

When we left my apartment that night, I left mortal existence behind forever. We went to the top of the Empire State Building to view the city. It was like a dream, overlooking it all from afar. I no longer felt kinship to mortals around us. A veil shimmered between us, through which I saw and heard in the abstract, like in a different dimension, one of light and air. They were plodding earthbound creatures— voices babble and faces featureless. Only Ethan was real.

All that night, we walked and talked together, along the waterfronts and through the parks, full of each other. Then as the sky began to lighten, we went to Ethan's brownstone on the Upper East Side.

Hated the place. Dark, grim, thoroughly *Dickensian*. All massive dark mahogany and stiff horsehair in muddy colors, overly embellished. As Ethan closed heavy oak shutters and velvet drapes, the realization I'd never walk in the sun again came over me. Rushing to the door, I flung it open. He caught me and held me tightly as I struggled, beating my wings against the cage.

"We must stay indoors when the sun rises."

"I can't be shut up! I'll die if I go into one of those things!"

He shook with laughter as he realized what I was referring to. "We don't sleep in coffins, you goose."

A strange numbness settled over me. "What will the sun do to us?"

"An agonizing death that unleashes a cancer and rots away your flesh."

"What about stakes through the heart?"

"Why these morbid questions, *cara mia*? You needn't worry about anything, my precious girl. I'll protect you always."

"*From what?*"

He chuckled, and set me down, locking various bolts and locks around the room with a key he placed safely into his pocket. Then he led me upstairs to a vast bed. I undressed and he tucked me in with a kiss. "Sweet dreams." He turned to leave. "I have telephone calls to make. I'll be in directly. Sleep well, my love."

I was exhausted but still uncertain and apprehensive. I tossed and turned, but sleep soon got the better of me.

All at once, the shutters blew open and I was surrounded by a swirling snowstorm, blinded, cold and naked. Where was Ethan? Snow was filling the room and the sun would get me! I called out for him but he didn't answer. Then a tall figure with long, pale hair emerged from the snow, with arms extended, saying, "*Who will go with him?*" I cowered on the bed and screamed, as he reached out to take me by the throat.

"Mia, my darling? What's wrong?"

My eyes opened on Ethan, lying nude next to me in the bed. It was just a dream.

"A nightmare— is it nighttime again already?"

"Come see the change!"

He took my hands and led me over to the tall cheval mirror.

My eyes were brighter, my hair more lustrous and my skin very pale, but otherwise, I looked much the same. "We cast a reflection?"

"You're no ghoul. You are reborn! Everything lost in man's ascent is restored, animal powers, coupled with heightened awareness and understanding. Your immune system is enhanced to the point where all diseases are rendered harmless. Your body is capable of healing serious wounds in a relatively short time. You are stronger, faster and have superior powers of hearing, scent and sight."

"Like Superman?"

He was delighted. "You've read of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*?"

"No— the comic book hero— the one in the red cape?"

He frowned as he preened in the mirror. "I'm afraid I'm ignorant of this paragon."

"Actually, you kinda look like him."

Ethan placed my hands on the naked expanse of his chest, over his beating heart. The blood running through his body lulled me into a semi-hypnotic state as he spoke. “We’re flesh and blood, whatever the legends say, a highly specialized predatory animal, with an intellect and capacity to love and desire as a human being, but superior to them in every way. A *Superman* if you will.”

A chill ran through me. Images of torch light parades, swastikas and pathetic corpses stacked in pits of lime flashed through my brain. I was about to protest when horrible throbbing started in my head and my body was suddenly racked. Even the abortion hadn’t hurt this much.

I cried, clutching him. “Ethan! What’s the matter? What’s this pain?”

“Hunger,” he told me simply. “You must feed.”

That’s it! Joe thought. *Pain* drove her to appease this monster invading her body. It caused her intense physical distress, propelling her to take human life without a thought. “It’s an intense physical urge, painful? When does this usually start?”

“A week or so after I’ve completely fed, I feel a twinge.” Suddenly she took to her feet. “You really don’t give a shit about *me*, do you?”

Joe sat up and snapped his notebook shut. “What?”

Sparks ignited in her eyes. “Asking you a question, this is the time for questions?”

“I’m supposed to ask *you* questions.”

“Hardly seems fair.”

“Your question sounded a hell of a lot like an accusation.” He stood up, holding his hands out before her. “Without you Mia, there’s no project. You’re the key to the door to immortality.”

“The child I aborted was immortality.”

“That’s not what we’re here to discuss.”

Her voice hit a dangerously low note, “Get the fuck out.”

“No.” Joe stood his ground awaiting attack as sweat beaded alarmingly on his forehead. She crouched on the chair, a bobcat ready to pounce. Instinct told him to show no fear. It turned out to be the best course of action.

She suddenly shrugged, as if killing him wasn’t worth the trouble, and sank back down into the chair. “You’re just as much of a monster as I am. Just look around you—at the bestiality of the human race.”

“That’s what you see.”

“Until you convince me otherwise—get out—I’m sick of you poking around in my soul! Fucking men, always trying to penetrate me in one way or another...”

“Then why are you here exactly, Mia?”

She threw her head back, laughing like Garbo. “I want to walk in the sun, and laugh as the old demons destruct all around me.”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

She merely shook her head. Disgusted, Joe packed up his bag to leave. She crossed the room to the desk, opening the drawer and took out an envelope, extending it imperiously toward him. Annoyed, Joe took it and left, making his way to Kurt’s cell.

Kurt’s small figure stood before the immense piano, not playing it, just staring at his hands on the keys. He looked as if he had just come from the shower, in jeans but shirtless, hair a mass of damp ringlets, the scent of herbal soap clinging to him, skin flushed. Once again, the light was dim, casting long Citizen Kane-like shadows across the room. Joe cleared his throat. “I’m not disturbing you?”

Kurt looked up. “What can I do for you, Doctor?”

“A letter for you.”

The vampire approached, fluidly with dignified grace, distant and cool in manner. Joe towered over him, but it still didn’t make him feel any safer.

Kurt extended his hand languidly for the letter. As he did, Joe saw in a flash something that made his skin crawl. There on the paleness of Kurt’s slender forearm were numbers tattooed in blue ink. Joe couldn’t help but gawk.

“Why do you stare?” Kurt snapped.

“I had no idea...”

“Well, now you know.”

“You must’ve been just a kid.”

Kurt’s voice grew hard-edged, as he turned away and reached for his shirt,
“One grows up fast.”

Joe suspected Kurt had a history, but this wasn’t quite what he’d imagined. In a concentration camp—and for how long before this happened to him? It explained the frail appearance he’d carry with him for eternity. What complicated memories motivated him? What demons haunted him and did he wear them tattooed on his brain like the horrifying numbers on his skin?

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your pity.”

“I expect you don’t.”

“Mia will fill you in.” Kurt began to button his shirt.

“I need you to answer a question for me. She’s driven me crazy with it.”

Kurt looked up at him, white face frozen into a polite mask. “Mia may be often infuriating, but never dull.”

“She says she sees certain... potential in me. Can you see it, too?”

Kurt looked deeply into Joe’s eyes, and then abruptly pushed up the cuff of his shirt. “You saw this?”

The inky blue numbers stood out in sharp contrast to the vampire’s white skin.

“Yes,” he answered, not really wanting to meet Kurt’s eyes. Another level of tension zapped their encounter, as a long-buried ancestral demon raised its head.

“I’ve seen such potential in mortals.” Kurt looked hard at Joe, boundless rage blazing in his eyes. Joe knew better than to flinch and held his ground, staring back. Kurt slid his sleeve back over his arm. “It’s there. However, I see it in them *all*.”

“Am I somehow destined to become— a monster?”

Kurt shrugged, turning back to the piano. “That’s up to you.” He began tapping out a melody with one finger. “There’s a letter on the table, Doctor.”

“About Mia...”

Kurt’s voice scaled up boyishly with tension, “Mia can be difficult.”

“She claims to want to walk in the sun and watch the old demons destruct around her.”

“Our culture is older than any existing nation of men and our customs aren’t enlightened. We’re slaves. Of course she wants to see them fall.”

“And this project will hasten that?”

“Perhaps, we’ll *all* be worse off, but we can never go back to that world.”

“Who’s hunting you?”

“We don’t know— only that there’s a bounty on our heads.”

“I’m doing my best to make it more tolerable for you here.”

“Mia is the only thing that could possibly make it tolerable.” His voice filled with longing, “How is she?”

“Well, we had an argument. She’s pissed.”

“Mia is formidable in an argument.” A small smile flickered over Kurt’s face. “She’s so very— *passionate*. If we were together, she’d be much calmer.”

Joe ran his hand over the polished surface of the piano. “This piano is horrendously expensive. It’s a shame for it to collect dust.”

Kurt touched the keys ruefully. “I feel no desire when she can’t hear.”

“I’d consider it an honor to hear you play.”

Kurt scrutinized Joe for a moment. “Very well, Doctor.”

Joe sank down into the leather armchair. “Please, call me, Joe.”

Kurt settled down onto the bench. “Anything you’d particularly like to hear, Doctor?”

So, Kurt wasn’t about to lessen the professional distance. Joe had the feeling it would always remain so. “I wouldn’t presume.”

Kurt’s eyes focused on the distant wall. “I’ll play what Mia likes.”

He sat in silence for a moment then started to play. Joe recognized the piece from a CD in his office. Chopin’s *Nocturne in E Flat Major*. It started out softly, delicately building, outwardly innocuous as a rippling brook but with potential torrents carefully contained. Kurt’s slight figure became powerful as his hands moved over the keys, drawing out all the dark passion of the music. Amazing that one of these things could create such beauty.

When Kurt finished Joe was speechless, moved by the music. Kurt turned on the bench, huge eyes glittering silently, brushing back a tawny curl from his pale forehead. They regarded each other, the man and the vampire, one male animal and the other. Did Kurt have any idea of the suggestive things Mia said? And what did she say to Kurt on that cream-colored perfumed stationery? *Intimate missives.*

Adversaries, without any say in the matter. Was this why Lydia sent him in with them, to play them off against each other on purpose? And if so, why?

Surprisingly, it was Kurt who broke the silence, almost shyly, “Does she like the flowers?”

Joe didn’t know what to say, so he told the barest truth, hoping Kurt wouldn’t see it entire. “She hasn’t said anything.”

Kurt’s face went still. Joe quickly changed the subject. “I’m no expert but you’re extraordinarily gifted.”

Kurt shrugged, the smallest of smiles warming his face. Was he actually blushing?

“You might have been a great musician. I mean you are. You could have been famous if...”

Kurt became horrifyingly still, a marble figure carved into a tomb, or was it a predator about to spring? “If this hadn’t happened to me?”

“Could you always play like this? Or is it enhanced by the mutation?”

“No more questions!” Kurt suddenly snapped. “Leave me now.”

Joe paused for a moment then spoke humbly, “Thank you Kurt.”

“For what?”

“The music.”

“The music? Yes. The music— you’re welcome,” Kurt replied in a vague staccato, staring hard at Joe’s face. “This is very difficult for her, to be caged, like an animal, after all we’ve been through. I’m gravely concerned.”

Joe wasn’t quite sure what to make of this. Was this a warning of some kind?

“This isn’t what she promised.”

Joe stood up, running his hands over his exhausted eyes. “I should go now.”

Kurt’s face relaxed subtly. He moistened his full bottom lip slightly. “I don’t hold you responsible, Doctor. Forgive me if I was brusque.”

“I’d be handling it a lot worse if I were you.”

The vampire laughed a small laugh, like an intake of breath. Joe smiled and stifled the bizarre urge to pat him on the head paternally, and turned uneasily to let himself out of the cell.

SIX

* * * *

Joe sat in his office, overlooking the symbols he'd jotted down from Kurt's letter when Jean surprised him by touching his shoulder. "Runes, Joe?"

He looked up into her ocean-blue eyes. "*Ruins?*"

"*Runes*, stupid." She wrinkled her freckle-dusted nose. "Viking runes, used by the Norse, they carved them on these huge stones all over Europe. They're sometimes used for divination. My brother was into stuff like that."

"Divination?"

"Prophesy, fortunetelling."

Joe reached over, closed the office door and swung his chair around to face her. "Jean, don't tell anyone, but I'm carrying letters between Mia and Kurt."

She laughed. "How romantic of you. Here are the reports from pathology and medical."

"Finally. See you later?"

She smiled and nodded as she made her way out.

Joe was astonished by the test results. Cells that never died, only divided and re-divided, constantly rejuvenating. Deadly viruses, Ebola, HIV, and virulent bacteria like bubonic plague were devoured by a few drops of their blood. The cell cultures went on that way for one week or so, but unless fed fresh human blood cells they became erratic, dying rapidly. When exposed to ultraviolet light, they broke down in minutes, the cells unstable, and deteriorating into rotting jelly.

More wonders appeared before his eyes. Chromosomal anomalies in all twenty-three pairs, as if someone had snipped out offending genetic threads and replaced them. But what was responsible for this tailoring? So far the agent was unidentified.

Human? So it appeared. Impossible to say, at this point, the extent of the differences. His scans showed their brains looked the same as human brains, but their limbic functions were more highly developed, and their sensory apparatus worked on a much more efficient level.

Their bodies weren't much different in appearance from mortals, except for an absence of pigmentation from non-exposure to the sun. Hair and nails grew at a slightly accelerated rate. Kurt grew facial hair, although very little. Their nails were somewhat harder and stronger, like horn. Their skin was as smooth as newborns, and hair luxuriously thick and glossy.

The vampires gained almost no weight. The digestive system still functioned as normal, but their caloric intake was very small at any one meal, but like birds they ate often, because of a more rapid metabolism. Odd, he considered, because most animals with quick metabolisms didn't live long, a notable difference being parrots, which often outlived their owners.

Their muscles, if not bulky were extremely dense and well developed—more flexible and two to three times stronger than a large, strong human male. But these two diminutive creatures weren't the largest specimens. A fully matured alpha male, as Mia called them, would be much more dangerous.

Of course there was the question of sex. Obviously, they still had the physical and mental capacity to perform and enjoy, but she didn't ovulate or menstruate and he shot blanks.

Joe spent hours reviewing the data in his office and wondering about them. Aside from the physiological differences the tests revealed, he observed nothing about their behavior that couldn't be construed as ordinary human behavior in a confined atmosphere. Both were bored, obviously, agitated by the constant intrusions on their privacy, but only Joe knew how much they

missed one another. No one on the staff but Jean or Lydia saw their emotional depth and intelligence, or even seemed to care. They didn't view them as anything but monsters. Yes, they had killed many times but they obeyed a biological imperative. Somehow they found a way to deal with it and still feel empathy. Yet even Joe wasn't quite sure if he wasn't being manipulated to believe so. That's what made them so dangerous.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was past four. Jean was off-duty. He had three hours until he had to meet with Mia. Enough time for a quick rendezvous.

Jean's lithe figure lay on the bed, tanned skin smooth and supple, molten gold hair falling over her straight shoulders. Something of the sun and sea about her, blue and gold and clean, Joe mused as he caressed her.

It ate him that they had to hide their relationship. This wasn't just some cheesy affair. Jean was more than a mistress. She was his only friend. If things were different he'd get a divorce and marry her, but he couldn't. His family would turn their backs on him. And what would Rima do? She'd never been on her own and wouldn't know how to get on without him. It was an unfair mess most Americans wouldn't comprehend in these days of easy coupling and uncoupling. He had scruples, duty to his family, but he couldn't live without Jean.

She rolled over to kiss him. "What time are you back on duty?"

"Graveyard shift, I have an appointment with her at seven but I have to stop in to see him first."

"Oh come on, Joe, all the guys envy you."

He rolled over onto his back and stretched his arms out over his head.
"They're welcome to the job. What do you think of her?"

Jean frowned thoughtfully, "They're both pretty creepy. They look at you and you're naked to them— like they can see inside your head."

Joe shook his head and rolled over on to his belly, laughing. “They read body and facial cues. Their olfactory sense is superior to ours. They can perceive slight changes in body chemistry by scent.”

She rubbed a knot out of his shoulder with her long, capable hands. “She’s gotten under your skin.”

“She’d like to.”

She rubbed harder at his shoulders. He grunted at the pressure of her fingers. “You’ve met your match.”

He looked up. “Huh?”

“You don’t take well to strong women. This one is beyond your wildest dreams. She has you by the balls.”

“Ridiculous,” he said, getting up from the mattress.

Jean cocked her head to the side and continued to rub it with the towel.
“Are you attracted to her?”

“She’s not my type.”

“The guys actually have a pool going to see who’ll have sex with her first, you or Kurt. They’re betting on you, I hear. Bunch of jerks, they’d shrivel if she so much as looked at them. Why do you think Lydia gave you this job?”

“A sick joke?”

“Maybe there’s a certain irony— but who else could stand up to her? She’d eat the others alive. You’re different. Why do you think Mia responds to you? Lydia knew exactly what she was doing.”

“First class castrating bitch...”

“You make me laugh. Lydia’s barely one hundred pounds, but she has you, too. Maybe women in powerful positions are there for a reason, not just to annoy you. Lydia is the top in her field, and a damned good administrator.

She sent you in there because no one else has the forceful personality required for the job.”

Joe grinned. “Jean, you have common sense. You see things I can’t because I’m too...”

“Pigheaded? Arrogant?”

“Exactly, and now Mia’s pissed off at me and I don’t understand why.”

“Try treating her like a woman, not a subject.”

“If I start to see her as a human being, I’m lost.”

Jean’s face darkened. “What do you think she wants?”

“Not sex, that’s just a manipulative ploy.”

“Maybe she’s falling in love...”

“Why are we even having this conversation?”

“They’re people, Joe, even if they aren’t like us. I talk with Kurt when I run scans on him. He’s very sensitive and kind of sweet. He loves her deeply.”

“Don’t get taken in. They fool me sometimes too. It’s how they operate. They make you think they’re human—then suck everything out of you. Don’t tell me you’re falling in love with Kurt?”

“Don’t be silly. But there’s something, well—*ethereal* about him. His face is achingly perfect, with that honey-colored hair and those great big blue eyes—like an angel—a beautiful male angel. Both of them are gorgeous in this unearthly way. Maybe vampires are the angels people claim to see...”

“Reading the tabloids at the supermarket again?”

She flicked her towel again at him and he pulled her down to him laughing.

“Did you check out those runes, Joe?”

“Don’t tell me a thing. Don’t spell anything. They must use it as a cipher.” He kissed her on the throat. “Enough about them.” He began kissing her sun-brown skin all over, haunted suddenly by the image of porcelain-pale flesh. Jean wrapped legs around to take him inside, but he was elsewhere, far beyond the confines of her cozy apartment and tanned body.

Kurt was angelic, Joe had to admit, when he entered his cell later that evening. More like a pubescent boy than the young man he’d obviously been. His eyes caught Joe’s for a moment and appeared vaguely amused.

“Productive afternoon, Doctor?”

Joe ignored his observation. “I’m on my way to Mia. You have a letter?”

Kurt studied Joe’s face again as he handed him an envelope. His expression darkened. “Yes, I see...”

Joe let himself out cautiously, not really sure what Kurt was getting at. Moments later, Joe handed Mia her partner’s letter. She rushed over to the armchair to read it, chuckling at something in the contents.

Joe cleared his throat. “Mia—about Kurt. I saw something last night, on his arm.”

She looked up. “I thought you knew. The doctors must have seen when we were examined.”

“Somehow I missed this. Which camp?”

“Dachau.”

“How did he survive? He looks as if the wind could have blown him away.”

“He almost didn’t. His entire family was gassed at Auschwitz. You disturbed a major demon. You know who he was?”

“No.”

“A child prodigy, a celebrated pianist.”

“I see.” Remembering Jean’s advice, he took a deep breath and did an unaccustomed thing. “Listen. I’m sorry if I was less than sympathetic last time we met. I’m an insensitive boob sometimes—a lot of the time. You’ve taken great risks in coming here and I understand that this work is very important to you. I hope we can continue.”

For a split second her mouth dropped open and eyes widened in surprise, then just as rapidly, she shrugged it off and took her place. “It’s ok. Let’s go.”

He pulled out his notes. “You left off where Ethan made you a vampire. What happened after that?”

“Well, the first year was kind of a training period for me. We lived in Ethan’s home in Virginia. It was a large, red brick house built along graceful Georgian lines. I’d spent my life in small apartments and now he brought me to this mansion. By day, I’m sure it was lovely, surrounded by huge old oaks and a vast green lawn, but that first night the shadows lent a gothic aspect to the place, making me uneasy, like some Bronte heroine.

This sudden urge to flee overtook me, and I might have if Ethan hadn’t held his arm firmly about me. If you could say anything for Ethan, he inspired confidence. As situations go, it was very bizarre. Here I was with a man sprung from my dreams, who vowed to love me for eternity, but it still wasn’t *quite* all I’d dreamt of. One teensy little fact I couldn’t get past; he was one hundred and twenty, and drank blood to survive. No shit, I shivered standing in front of my new home.

He sensed my apprehension. “It’s very strange to be uprooted from the only life and place you’ve ever known. It’ll seem so for a time. Once I teach you what you need to know, we may mingle more freely in human society, and you’ll appreciate the world far more than you did before. I will always be at your side to protect you.”

Again, I asked myself—*from what?*

The finality gave me that queasy Jane Eyre-ish feeling in the gut again. I depended now on his sufferance for my very survival. No longer part of the

mortal world, I'd no earthly, or should I say unearthly, idea of what the vampiric one would bring. Clutching him tightly, I burst into tears.

Ethan, extremely moved, comforted me. "Hush now. Let's see the house, shall we?"

He unlocked the front door and switched on the lights. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was still the twentieth century.

He toured me about the house, pointing out works of art and architectural features with great pride as I clung nervously to his arm.

"Gee whiz, I'll never get used to the fact that you're over a century old!"

Ethan smiled at that. "Wait until you meet one from another millennium."

Now I was truly appalled. Creatures from societies that burned people alive, sacrificed virgins and kept slaves? *Slavery*? Oh boy, I hadn't even considered this question. Obviously, it was part of Ethan's past.

"What about the vampire who—I didn't know the lingo yet—did this to you?"

He kind of snapped at me, "We call ourselves *Immortyls*. Vampire is a vulgar term."

"Sorry. So who did it?"

His face tensed. "I really don't wish to discuss it."

I quickly changed the subject as we entered another room. "Wow, what's this place?"

"The drawing room."

"Oh Ethan it's so pretty!"

Delicate furnishings were swathed in bright silks and tapestry. Richly patterned rugs of blue and yellow wool covered gleaming wood floors. A

huge chandelier sparkled overhead. My breath caught in wonder at the glitter, like the stars, like Ethan.

“I could stay here forever!”

The most splendidiferous object was pleased, lifting and twirling me around. I laughed, the glittering lights and motion making me giddy. Little did I know when I spotted the notice for the play that I was to glimpse a world about to dawn!

He set me down and pulled something sparkling from his pocket, an art nouveau butterfly pendant set with star sapphires and tiny diamonds. “To commemorate your emergence from the chrysalis.” He did the clasp around my neck. “Your journey is just beginning, my butterfly.”

Just where would it take me? To the end of the earth and back—this particular act, I was confined to the Old Dominion—a Bird of Prey in a gilded cage, if you will.

Well, it all took some getting used to. Not just the liquid diet, the whole darn shebang. The lack of sunlight really got to me. The sun was in my blood and I’d always found the winter depressing. I was used to New York crowds and my raucous theatre chums. Ethan’s house, however, was isolated from the rest of the world and I had no human contact. Even the two elderly servants worked while we slept and then went home.

I was also curious about everything having to do with my lover, but Ethan wasn’t exactly forthcoming with information. As loquacious as he could be, there were periods of brooding silence that went on and on, when he would peevishly wave me away. I’d back off, hurt and bewildered, but the night my fangs finally came in, he demanded we share essence immediately. And I learned a curious thing.

I eagerly tore into his throat for the first time, embracing the glowing pulse of his heart within my own. Then the screen lit up inside me, and I saw the tall blond man of my nightmare, his long hair blowing in the wind, standing in a snowy landscape with arms outstretched. A searing climax rocked us both, as if this person willed it. I tried to probe Ethan’s memory deeper and

find out who this man was, but my lover abruptly pulled away and the vision vanished. We lay there panting and gasping for breath.

“Ethan, can we read minds?”

He pulled himself over me, eager for round two. “Really Mia.”

I opened my thighs to admit him. Every evening started this way, not that I objected. I was more than happy to oblige him.

“I sense things about you sometimes...”

He didn’t miss a stroke. “You’re simply reading the language of the body, the timbre of the voice. Trust me, the less hocus pocus you believe the better. It clouds the mind.”

“How do you explain the visions when we share essence?”

He pulled out abruptly. “Visions?”

“I saw a man with long blond hair, standing in the snow. Who is he?”

He rolled off of me. “No one—you saw nothing! A hallucination brought on by ingesting blood, nothing more!”

“Seems to me, you know him well...”

He ignored my questions and got up to dress. “Get dressed. You have reading to do.”

Ethan had peculiar ideas about our place in the world and thought it his duty to instruct me nightly in the drawing room. “Mortals are lesser beings,” he said calmly, as he laid out his nightly game of solitaire on the inlaid card table. “You’ve undergone a metamorphosis. Your flesh is no longer mortal, and now you must shed the vestiges of the puny human psyche. Open your consciousness to new possibilities...”

I struggled through the dusty old tome he’d assigned me, scowling. This philosophy of his was, in my opinion, simply a case of some animals being

more equal than others, but it was seductive when offered by the epitome of male beauty. To Ethan, after living thirty-three years at the apex of human development, it seemed only natural that his new form took on divine proportions. It really isn't hard to imagine how he'd come to this conclusion. One look at Ethan would have made a believer out of the most hardened skeptic.

Ever the curious little cat, I put down the book he'd assigned me and thumbed through a very old leather bound photo album on the table, to a picture of a girl, fair, very slender, in her late teens. Her eyes stared out of the old daguerreotype like a plea for help. No one ever smiled much in those old pictures but she looked positively scared to death. "Ethan, this is your wife?"

An annoyed look came over him. "Yes—that's Sally Anne."

I couldn't help feeling jealous. "Did you love her?"

"We were ill-suited. I married her out of duty. My father was afraid he'd die before seeing any grandchildren. She was the least objectionable choice."

I felt another more severe stab. "You had children?"

A pained look briefly crossed his face. "Two sons, Robert and Joseph," he said, quietly turning the leaf to show me.

I looked down on two toddlers dressed in the fashion of a century ago, the unmistakable stamp of Ethan on those sweet faces. Gut instinct told me he still grieved for them. "Ethan, can't we have a baby?"

His face had that sudden odd look again. "No. We procreate through the blood."

"What if you had taken me and I hadn't—gotten rid of it?"

"An abomination that would have devoured you from inside. We're sterile. We'll never make a child together."

I sank to the floor in a heap, sobbing. For some reason, in the glow of transformation, I'd never considered this. What had I deluded myself into thinking? I wasn't really alive anymore was I? I was some kind of ghoul now no matter what fancy name we called ourselves. Ethan lifted me to my feet and held me close. "Hush now little bird, don't cry. I understand."

I tried to free myself. "You didn't *murder* your own offspring! I'm eternally damned for what I did!"

"Who is to judge what you did? It was the best thing you could have done, under the circumstances. There's no such place as hell, except for the one men make, but you are my angel, and I can't bear your tears."

I choked back the tears as he ordered, but I'd never absolve myself of the responsibility. Every time I went to his arms I'd remember what I'd done to get there. Yet, there I was and how I craved his embrace. If he was damnation—then I was damned.

Ethan's regime didn't let me hunt at first, instead he taught me to navigate the sinuous web of the human mind and just what strings to pull to get the desired result, involving me in complex seductions with mortals. Physical attractions snare the victim, but he trained me to play the vampire on a higher plane, to learn the victim's weaknesses and exploit them, whether the demons be sexual, psychological or both—more challenging and hence more of a thrill at the game's conclusion.

More than just a voyeuristic thrill was involved in these nasty little con games we played. Each time we took on more complicated scenarios, more complex rules and more wealthy victims, and he guided me through each with a sense of deadly purpose.

He also dictated my appearance, wardrobe and manners to the letter, until I was completely his creation, his dress-up doll. However, Ethan's lessons also involved the use of less feminine weapons, namely knives and firearms, and the best methods for dispatching Immortyls, quick decapitation or a large caliber bullet to the brain or heart. I couldn't imagine why he wanted me to learn all that.

After several months of training, Ethan finally let his falcon fly solo. We drove up north, all the way into Connecticut, to a lonely Tudor knock-off on a hill. Dusty gravel driveway crunched like shards of dried bone under our feet, while the Long Island Sound crashed on rocks below. Leaded glass windows on the first floor were dark, no beacon shining to welcome our arrival. I asked him who owned the house.

“Your former lover’s wife— time you did the honors.”

Up until now, Ethan had done all the actual killing, and I might have balked had it not been Richard.

We crept around to a completely modern patio and swimming pool surrounded by chairs and chaise lounges, where I envisioned Richard and Katherine on fine days, drinking cocktails and spitting venom.

A foghorn belched over the water. Mist enveloped the house like in some old Universal horror flick, the perfect setting. I could smell Richard’s blood already.

Ethan jimmied the back door and we stole into the house. Bluish moonlight streaming into the cavernous phony English Country interior set Ethan’s eyes ablaze. I ascended the stairway, gracefully in the manner he’d taught, careful not to let the tapping of my tiny heels ruin the element of surprise.

A small pool of light spilled out into the hallway. Berlioz on the radio. I took one deliberate step after another, forcing myself into the dark corner bearing Richard’s name. A baby cried desperately for help. Legions of demons poured out as I lay again on the table, cold instruments invading, tearing into me.

I took a deep breath and swooped into the room, alighting on the bed. Richard’s book fell to the floor with a thump. “Mia, good God, everyone thinks you’re dead!”

“Good thing you had Katherine as an alibi that night. Do I look dead to you?”

Beads of perspiration came on his forehead, the smell of adrenaline coursed through his body. “I’m relieved to see you alive.”

I traced the line of his throat, reaching unbuttoning the topmost pajama button. His pulse raced under his damp skin.

“We had a little appointment that day, remember? In *Sumara*. ” I ran my other hand up his thigh, a teasing little spider crawling up the old waterspout. I tossed my hair filling the air with a pheromone cocktail and slipped overtop him. His fingers timidly brushed the bare thigh above my stocking. I smacked his hand away. “Naughty boy.”

“You’re still full of surprises.”

“You’ve no idea.”

Ethan slipped into the room, leaning gracefully against the doorframe and laughed.

Richard blanched. “What the hell?”

Ethan was at his best, the cavalier at his lady’s service, all panache. “The lady needed an escort... you bowed out.”

I pinned Richard to the mattress. Bringing my face very close to his I whispered, “You owe me a life, *Dick*.”

His bloodshot gray eyes gleamed with fury. “You’re crazy— the two of you. Get out of my house!”

“Your house?”

He pushed against me. A rush of power went to my head as he fought, my hands gripping his throat, his heart accelerating racing against mine. Blue veins stood out in his forehead as I bared my fangs. “What in God’s name!”

“I finally know how Hilde felt when she drove Solness up the tower. Pity, I’ll never play her again. *Frightfully exciting!*”

His wide-eyed look of horror was almost compensation for the pain he'd caused. A warm wet patch of urine spread on the mattress.

"Not very romantic, darling."

Ethan laughed, still in his casual pose at the doorway, perfect in every way. My bad boy never looked so good.

My lips brushed over Richard's throat. "Our revels are now ended Richard. Thanks for the ride."

I tore into the artery. A torrent of salt and iron slid warm down my throat and into my belly. His fingers clutched me as he whispered a prayer to the deceased god. My heartbeat grew stronger as his fought against the irresistible tide. Then— nothing. Demons ministered to me, fawning and caressing in adoration, whispering endearments, as I looked into my lord's approving frosted eyes."

Joe shuddered. "That's sick."

She ignored him and continued, "Ethan kept me locked away in his house for another couple of months, tweaking my skills until he was satisfied. Then one night I woke to find him holding a magnificent ball gown of blood red satin trimmed with spider web-delicate black lace and intricate jet beading, very old but beautifully preserved. "Come on, let's get you dressed."

After I'd dressed, he led me downstairs to the old ballroom, where I smelled the spicy perfume of roses, hundreds of them. Ethan moved silently about the room, lighting dozens of candles. He must have ransacked the house for candelabrum.

He softened in their glow, utterly devoid of the usual hauteur. I caught my breath in wonder. We were surrounded by masses of roses, placed about the room in vases and petals strewn on the floor. Boy, did he ever know how to make a girl love him.

He placed the needle down on a small phonograph. Waltz music filled reverberated off of the old walls like a heartbeat, as if the house was coming to life again after a long vampiric sleep.

He turned slowly. A pain like dying went through me. Wow, did he look good.

I stood, tremulous, anticipating his touch. What was this about? Was there some significance to all this?

He enfolded me in his arms. “Happy Birthday, *cara mia*.”

“But it’s not....” I said, realizing the reason for this display, as his lips locked onto mine. It wasn’t my birthday, not in the usual sense, not the anniversary of when my mother fatally labored to bring me into the world. It was the date I was reborn to *him*.

He reached into his breast pocket. Blood red and rainbow sparks spilled out into my hands. “Ethan, this must have cost a fortune!”

He clasped the necklace around my throat and kissed my bare shoulder. “A handful of cold stones cannot express the depth of my love for you.”

“It’s lovely, all of it. Thank you.”

He smiled, placing his hand on my waist. “Follow me.”

As if he didn’t know I’d tag along to the ends of the Earth. Add one more skill to his list of accomplishments. Was there anything he couldn’t do? My feet barely touched the parquet as he swept me about that blazing room expertly, leaving me breathless as always, a heavenly partner, devil that he was.

“I’ve engaged a villa on the Bay of Naples,” he said. “We leave tomorrow night. What do you think?”

Demons stirred in the dark corners. What did I think? Of my father, his warm hazel eyes looking down at me, his strong hand in mine, and my mother, her child-like face a memory from a photograph.

“I’d like to go very much. Oh Ethan, yes, yes!” Then it occurred to me. Europe, old ones were there. Was Ethan’s maker there? “Will we meet others?”

“Mia. There’s a certain etiquette I haven’t touched on yet.”

“Good grief, not more charm school lessons!”

He chuckled. “They won’t understand your charming impudence. You mustn’t speak until addressed, or look one directly in the eye.”

Did I hear him correctly? Speak when spoken to like a child? “Shall I don a veil and chastity belt?”

“Keep your wits about you and obey me. They’re accomplished liars and will say anything to lure you to their den. Pity them if they succeed.”

“I can handle myself.”

“Seriously Mia, we can’t afford enemies.”

“Like your progenitor?”

Ethan’s face slammed shut. “We won’t be calling on him.”

“Aren’t you afraid of offending him? What’s his name anyway?”

“Subject closed.”

“But Ethan— ”

“Must you spoil this evening? Dance!”

We danced until the candles sputtered. Ethan made a brief turn about the room, extinguishing nearly spent tapers, one by one, until only a single melted lump was left burning, casting him in long shadows, his beautiful face a tragic mask. Turning to a vase, he plucked out the largest, most spectacular bloom and regarded its perfect blood red petals sadly for a moment. Facing me, he smiled. “Name your heart’s desire, *Madonna*.”

“Nothing but you...”

Joe looked up. Mia’s eyes were a million miles away. “Mia. Are you all right?”

“Ethan was built on illusions... Like that game with the sticks... you pull them away and suddenly it all falls apart. I was all his illusions come to life to be loved and cherished. I never intended to...”

This wasn’t something he’d expected. “To what?”

She was still staring off into space. “Ethan dreamed that science would free us from our bondage.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Her eyes rested on him, fixed and enigmatic. As usual he had no idea what she was thinking. “Joe. Are you married?”

“Yes,” he answered, evasively. He’d rather not think of the tension at home in her presence.

“Any kids?”

“Four girls, two boys.”

“Jesus, you’re no slouch in your off hours. Obviously, you find time in your busy schedule for some things. Any pictures?”

He pulled out his wallet and opened it to show her. The family portrait had been taken against Rima’s wishes. She’d put on a lot of weight since little Ali’s birth.

“Your wife?”

He nodded.

She grinned maliciously. “Not really your type, is she?”

The stabbing behind his eyes grew worse, a vise wrapping around his head.
“We’ve been married twenty-one years.”

“Congratulations. Am I keeping you from something?”

Jean. That’s all Mia needed, some demon, as she put it, to torment him with. “Nothing— just tired.”

“You’ve been looking at your watch all evening. Someone’s waiting for you — but not Rima.”

“How did you know my wife’s name? You just asked if I was married.”

“I do my homework, remember?”

“My personal life is off-limits.”

“Always demons lurking round the corner, blond demons and dark ones. You prefer blonde, but your secrets are safe with me, Joe.”

So she knew about him and Jean. “My secrets are none of your goddamned business.”

“Demons have a habit of devouring the soul if you keep them locked up.”

He rose, gathering his belongings. “I have no interest in demons!”

Her face twisted up. “You should, once they take hold, there’s no turning back.”

He turned his back on her. “I’m really getting tired of these mind games, Mia.”

“Mind games?” she laughed. “You have no idea... My regards to Jean.”

He turned at the door as he let himself out. “Fuck you.”

Mia only sat there, smiling her Mona Lisa smile.

SEVEN

* * * *

By the time Joe entered Mia's cell a week later, everyone but security had gone for the night. He was exhausted from his hectic schedule, worried he'd fall asleep and not really in the mood to deal with Mia's barbs.

He found her bent over a charcoal drawing of Kurt, capturing his haunted expression very well in stark black and white. "That's pretty good."

"If I can't have him at least I'll be able to remember what he looks like. Isn't he beautiful?"

"I don't make a habit of looking at other men."

Her face twisted with malicious humor. "Afraid you might like what you see too much?"

He noted the bag of blood floating in the hot water bath. "I'm sorry— you haven't uh— fed yet."

"Nasty stuff. You could spike it a little or something."

"Sucking blood from a plastic bag doesn't cut it?"

She tipped back her chair. "Not really— they even brought it cold at first, but finally someone caught on to the fact that we like it warmed, so now they heat it to 98.6. Immortyls function just fine on donated blood, and actually a lot do these days, but the experience is lacking, like a baby must feel when it's taken away from the breast and someone shoves a rubber nipple in its mouth. The contact, the life isn't there."

"I'm not sure I understand."

“How about this analogy? It’s like masturbation: you’re relieved but you would prefer a living, breathing partner.”

“I see.”

Her face dimpled malevolently. “All that blood rushing through the body. Zing go the strings of your heart, so to speak.”

“We’ve been analyzing your neurotransmitters. Your serotonin levels are lower than those of mortals.”

“Going to put me on Prozac?”

“We’ve no idea of the effect antidepressant drugs would have on your system. Frankly, I was alarmed by the lasting effect sedatives had on you. I’ve ordered no drugs be used on either one of you, until we understand the full effect they have. However, on the positive side we *have* found a neurotransmitter unique to vampires. Perhaps it helps with muscle functions and responses, why you’re faster and stronger.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’m kind of tired, Mia. If you don’t mind?”

She peered at his face. “You look like shit. Maybe you should go home and get some sleep after work?”

He ignored her oblique reference to Jean. “Do you need to— uh?”

“Not hungry at the moment.” She put down the charcoal and went into the bathroom to wash her hands, taking a moment at the mirror to preen before she returned.

He pulled out his notebook and collapsed into a chair. “Let’s get on with it. You said something last time about a trip to Italy?”

She settled down onto the bed with a bottle of nail polish and proceeded to pain her toenails. “Yeah, where I first got mixed up in all this mess... Well, the villa was everything Ethan promised, small and rustic with weathered

old whitewashed walls and red-tiled roof, covered in blood red climbing roses. The overgrown terraced garden had a blue tiled fountain and paths winding down the rocky hillside to the beach. But the bay, restless waves breaking on the rocks, the smell of salt and iodine, the shimmering silver ribbon of moonlight over its surface, completed the romantic picture.

Our respite ended a few nights after our arrival when a boat roared up to our dock. I lay drowsy in Ethan's arms, annoyed by the sudden interruption to our erotic evening ritual. Ethan raised himself from my body, placing his fingers to my lips. "Get dressed."

I gawked at him until it dawned on me why he was behaving in this fashion. "Who is it?"

"Gaius Lopus, *elder* of these parts. I telegrammed before we sailed seeking permission to stay in his territory. Not a word until he addresses you, understand? Eyes averted—I know you find it difficult but a little feigned modesty is in order."

He put on his robe and went downstairs to answer the door.

Dressing hastily, I galloped down the steps to join Ethan and our visitor below. Freezing mid-way, I caught eyes so black you couldn't tell iris from pupil. His dark hair was touched with silver and nose aquiline. Words flowed olive oil smooth from his full lips, "*Che bella.*"

Ethan glared as I slowed my descent to a dignified glide. Taking my hand, he presented me to our guest. "Gaius, this is my Mia."

Luckily he introduced me in English. It would have been ridiculous in Italian. *Mia mia.* Gaius took my hand and raised it to his lips. He wasn't quite Ethan's stature but nearly six feet. He resembled a man of fifty, carrying himself with an air of soldierly authority, utterly relaxed but the smile oozing all over his face was very creepy—like moray eels in the bay. No tiny movements in the facial muscles, no shifting of weight from foot to foot as a human being would do. He barely seemed to breathe. Only his heartbeat gave him away as a living being. Where Ethan's composed

arrogance still smacked of humanity, Gaius was one of the legendary walking dead.

The ancient's smile broadened as his eyes took stock of me. Ignoring Ethan's warning, I met his gaze, determined not to show fear.

"Interesting." A glimmer of emotion flickered when he spoke, "You've secrets in your eyes, child. What are you hiding, eh? She has the look of the Neapolitans."

Ethan spoke for me. "Her mortal father was a Disantini."

Gaius's mouthed twitched with suppressed laughter. "If I'd known the Disantini to produce such a girl, I'd have taken her myself. Their women are uniformly hideous—but the youngest son immigrated to America, over some affair with a servant, actually insisted on marrying her. Threw away his fortune. Ah well, there's no fortune left to speak of. This is the child? Dear boy, the Disantini have a reputation for ruthlessness. What sort of mischief can we expect from this little pomegranate blossom?" He sank down regally in one of the heavy old chairs. "My old friend Brovik recently passed through asking after you. I told him I'd not seen you since before the war. Now you arrive on my doorstep with this girl. There will be no trouble?"

Who was Brovik? Was this Ethan's progenitor?

Ethan's hackles rose ever so slightly. "No." He put his arm around me. "I'm here for pleasure."

"Apparently so." Gaius's fingers drummed on the chair's arm. Smooth slightly golden skin covered his be-ringed hands, the backs covered in fine black, spidery hair. "Bring Mia to the palazzo. The girls are always glad to see you." Gaius leaned forward to me. "How *did* one of the wicked Disantini come to be among us, via America, no less? Speak up, little one. Are you a very she-devil, as your predecessors—or a romantic fool like your father?"

The old pervert's attitude irritated the shit out of me. If I opened my big mouth I'd regret it, but still Ethan prompted me.

"Mia, my dearest, answer Lord Gaius."

Gaius waited. I looked first at Ethan then to him.

"Is she stupid?"

Vitriol bubbled up to the surface. "The fuck I will."

Ethan turned purplish. "Mia! Apologize *at once!*"

"Apologize, my ass! I don't care if he's the lord-high demon of Hades."

Gaius blinked, I must have shocked him, but then he began to laugh, very hard. "Dear boy, you've no idea what you've gotten into."

"I've a fair idea."

"Proud and *passionate*," Gaius leaned forward, his hungry smile revealing fangs, a grinning Disney wolf. "What will the Northman say?"

"The Northman? Ethan, you have some *explaining* to do."

"Mia, upstairs, *now!*" Ethan commanded in a dangerously low tone. "I do apologize for her rudeness." I didn't budge. Ethan gave me a threatening look. "We'll talk *later* Mia, go."

Gaius raised his hand. "I'm not offended. Indeed, I'm intrigued. In answer to your question little one, the Northman is *elder* of your *house*. I'm surprised your *lord* hasn't spoken of him. Brovik is an old friend of mine—a very old friend. His domain lies to the North, from Britain and above. He'll no doubt want to make your acquaintance. Ethan, you know your duty. I won't interfere, but neither will I lie."

"Of course, he'll be informed we're here. I wouldn't dare offend your hospitality."

“Good, when shall we expect you on Capri?”

“Soon, give my regards to your ladies.”

Rising from the chair, Gaius crossed the room and inclined his head slightly. Ethan bowed, and they shook hands warily, two dogs cautiously sniffing around each other.

“Until then, Ethan.” Gaius bowed to me and raised my hand to his lips. “*Cara mia*, our world is much more dangerous with you in it.” He laughed and took the liberty of pinching my cheek.

Once Gaius was roaring back across the bay, Ethan checked the locks on the doors and windows and tested the electronic security system to see if it was functioning.

I threw myself in disgust into the chair Gaius had vacated. “What a jerk!”

Ethan sputtered with anger as he turned to face me. “Do you have any idea of what he is?”

I was definitely not in the mood to be scolded. “An arrogant old pervert!”

Ethan paced agitatedly about the room. “He’s *two thousand* years old, a former Roman general, not someone to trifle with. He’s called the *Wolf*, what makes you think you could take him on?”

I affected a casual pose examining my perfectly painted fingernails. “I’m not impressed.”

“You’d better be. He says if we stay or go. He’s the closest thing this place has had to an emperor in a thousand years, and just as corrupt. Don’t do anything else to encourage him. Meeting his eyes, taunting him, it’s a challenge Mia.”

“For heaven’s sake, it’s nineteen fifty one!”

He closed the heavy draperies. “I’ve told you how they are.”

“You’ve evaded my questions for a year now. Tell me about Brovik!”

“There’s nothing to tell. He made me, period!”

“No, I won’t accept that.”

“You’ll have to.” He strode to the door. “I’m going out. Lock the door behind me and stay inside.”

“You can’t keep me locked up forever!”

“Can’t I?” He laughed. “What would you do with this freedom you so desperately desire? That old monster on Capri would snatch you up in his jaws in a heartbeat, and you’d be one of *three* concubines. You wouldn’t like their games much.”

“Games?”

Ethan’s eyes turned to chips of blue ice. “My poor innocent lamb, you can’t imagine the things they get up to.”

And there I was stuck again, despite the new locale.

Two hours later, he still hadn’t returned. I was agitated and restless. I wanted to be outside. What would be the harm of strolling along the beach?

I took the steep steps down to the narrow strip of sand and rock. Slipping off my sandals, I headed off blithely down the beach, the sand cool and moist under my bare feet. Balmy Mediterranean breezes ruffled my hair and over my face. Tentatively, I dipped a toe into the dark water, inviting as a warm bathtub. Wading deeper, the water lapped at my dress and dampened the hem. I lifted the skirt above my knees and continued to wander.

Moonlight cut a swath of silver across the bay’s blackened surface. Far out on the horizon, tiny lights winked on the boats anchored there. The wind whipped my hair about my face.

Release! I stretched my arms out before me, not caring if my dress got wet, and closed my eyes, enjoying the sting of the salt spray against my face.

Why had this vampire never communed with the night? I raised my eyes to the stars and moon, laughing out loud at my rebellion. I spun in circles, holding my arms stretched wide to embrace the darkness, faster and faster, a tiny cyclone. Delirious abandon! Blessed freedom, to fly alone in the night free of the falconer!

Fragrance hung heavy in the air. Male. I turned toward the scent. The hairs rose on the back of my neck as I got a better whiff. *Danger.* Something was wrong, it wasn't Ethan's scent and there was more than one.

I stood dead still, listening to the whisper of footsteps and heartbeats, the slightest shifting and crunching in the sand. One, two, no three—closing in quickly. Panicking, I ran toward the steps as fast as my legs could carry me. At full speed, I'd beat a gazelle, but they were cheetahs and easily overtook me in that short distance. Remembering Ethan always cautioned to show no fear, I froze as they surrounded, appalled and amazed by their appearance.

All three had the look of pubescent boys, thirteen or fourteen, but spared the awkwardness of early adolescence, graceful, their enchanting, unblemished faces polished marble. All were somewhat raggedly dressed in the manner of street kids. Glittering eyes watched me curiously as they speculated in Italian where I'd come from and who I belonged to. Their circle around me tightened. Laughter tinkled like crystal bells. I felt like Wendy in a very bizarre part of Neverland. Ethan said this ancient world wasn't the one I'd left behind. Nothing was sacred to these monsters, certainly not childhood. On each was a small mark behind the left ear, of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus.

Their eyes were ancient and expressions hungry. I backed away slowly, preparing to flee. The leader inclined his head and the others moved in closer. *Pack hunters.*

The leader sprang and clapped his hand over my mouth, dragging me away. In spite of his size he was much stronger. I struggled against him with all my power. His grip tightened nearly crushing my chest. Gasping desperately for air, I clawed at his bare arms, leaving long, raw tracks streaming with blood. He yelped.

Something large ran toward us at full speed. The other two took flight, leaving the leader holding me at the water's edge. Ethan's enraged roar filled the air. "Vermin!"

My captor dropped me abruptly. Salt water stung my nostrils and throat. I came up sputtering to see Ethan grasping him by his slender throat and holding him up to his icy gaze. The boy's eyes bulged out of his skull as Ethan's hand closed tighter over his windpipe.

"Ethan, for God's sake let him go!"

"Mia, stay out of this!" Ethan growled, as he began to twist the boy's head around the neck like a light bulb. The boy screamed, struggling vainly as his neck ripped open with a sickening crunch of bone and moist tearing of flesh. Tendons wriggled, bloody spaghetti, as the head came loose. Blood spurted everywhere splashing us both. Terror stricken eyes glared from the lifeless boy's head, the once sweet mouth frozen in a grimace. Ethan grasped the head by the hair and held it over his open mouth, gulping down the rain of blood and then to my revulsion raised the body to his lips to suck the remaining blood from the raw stump.

He stood, a panting animal, licking thick crimson clots from his lips, covered in sweat and rusty red smears, his thick dark hair plastered to his skull. "How dare you disobey!" He struck me hard across the mouth. I fell to the ground, sheltering my body with my hands. "They'd have draggged you off and violated you again and again. They're the lowest of the low, sewer rats, castoffs!"

"Gaius did this! *Little boys*, for crissakes, Ethan!"

"They were never innocent." He turned away and went about the business of burying the body, covering it with sand and rock.

"Did you have to kill him?"

He looked at me as shocked as if I'd suggested we go sunbathing the next day. "It's customary, a matter of honor."

“Honor is shit to me! You cling to these absurd notions as if they still meant something! It’s bullshit, Ethan! Gaius is nothing but a disgusting pedophile! We should sleep in coffins and haunt graveyards because we *are* ghouls. You think I can I develop a new conscience to suit? You make me sick! I’m no better off than them. Maybe I don’t wear your mark, but I can’t venture a foot from my doorstep without *someone* preying on me. You never told me I’d be your slave when you swore undying love.”

“You accepted me as your master.”

“I thought it was a goddamned *metaphor!*”

“You were *aching* for it.”

It was true. I wanted to be so thoroughly sexually dominated by this spectacular creature that I hadn’t questioned all this entailed. Submission in all other aspects grated.

“Where does this put you in relation to your master?”

Ethan flinched. “I have no *master*.”

“I’m not that naive. Someone’s always on top. Does Brovik top you?”

He raised his hand again, but I stared him down. He dropped it and then tore off his clothes to dive into the water, swimming very far out. I hesitated a moment but then tore off my own to join him... ”

Joe cleared his throat. “So— you called this Gaius an *elder*. This is how order is kept?”

“Elders are like feudal barons in their own little fiefdoms. There are thirteen houses in all. They fall over themselves to be hospitable should other *Immortyls* chance to visit. It’s very bad form not to. You know the old story about vampires not entering a house without invitation? Believe it, because they’re highly territorial sonsofbitches. You don’t just barge in without making the proper petition to the head of household, but on the other hand he’s honor bound to make you welcome. Elders handle problems in house

whenever possible. Justice is swift and deadly. Each house is its own little world, each one more bizarre than the next. The elder sets the tone. There's a body called the Grand Council, made up of elders of the houses, presided over by the oldest living *Immortyl*, Kalidasa. Major disputes are brought to the Chief. Otherwise the GC meets only at the turn of each century. Oh, by the way, slaves have almost no rights— cast-offs none.

It never really hit me until that moment that I was his virtual prisoner. After the incident on the beach I was always apprehensive when he left but he assured me that *sewer rats* would never invade the domicile of an *alpha*. But one night when I was alone, a car approached, from the whine of the engine, something small and sporty. It wasn't Ethan's. He preferred more substantial automobiles, always in discreet black.

I'd taken up drawing in pastels and was setting up a still life of a bottle of wine and fruit on the table, opulent oranges, grapes and pomegranates. I couldn't stomach veggies anymore, but fruit had a pleasant scent, like flowers. Rare red meat I devoured with relish. Strangely enough, garlic, the traditional old bane of vampires, was entirely revolting to me. So much for my Italian ancestry.

As the car pulled into the drive, I peered out the window. It was the landlord and he'd brought Dirk, his young *alpha* in training, a thoroughly nasty creature who reminded me of a mortal child who pulled the wings off flies. This former SS thug was a hulking brute whose large hands hung down his sides, like he only recently learned to walk upright. I suppose some might call him handsome with his large nose, jutting jaw, yellowish eyes and blondish hair. Not my flavor by any means. But he liked me well enough.

I went to the door and opened it. Ethan told me not to let anyone in while he was out, however I wasn't sure his eeriness, Gaius would appreciate being treated so rudely.

Gaius took me by the hands, kissing my cheeks. Dirk grinned at me. I ignored him.

"Ethan will be back soon. Please come in, my lord."

Gaius's unctuous smile flowed over his face. "If you insist. Dirk, come."

Dirk leered as he walked by me and reached out, tugging playfully at my hair. I could have protested but saw no reason to make a scene over something so harmless.

"Won't you sit down?" I motioned to the armchairs by the fireplace.

"Thank you," Gaius answered, strolling over to the table to peruse my work. "Lovely."

"It passes the considerable time."

"Don't let us interrupt you. Continue," Gaius ordered. He wasn't the type to just ask.

I sat down at my place to sketch again while Gaius stood at my shoulder observing. It was unnerving to feel those sharp black eyes on my neck, as if his fangs pierced the skin. "You must learn to paint in oils. I know a good teacher. He taught my Guilietta."

"Until she developed a taste for him and got whipped," Dirk put in.

Gaius snapped at him, "Mind your tongue."

I shuddered at this glimpse inside their little domestic arrangement and hurried to change the subject. "I'm not sure my talent is worthy of developing."

"You have a good eye and sense of proportion."

"You're too kind, my lord."

"Lisette and Guilietta talk of you often. They speculate if you're all the horrible things they've heard and why you hate men."

"I don't hate men." I put down the crayon and blew the dust away. I cocked an eye at Dirk lounging in the chair. "But life would sure be more serene without some."

Gaius took my drawing up in his hands, examining it closely. “They visualize you as an *Amazon*.”

“I take it that’s not a compliment?”

He grinned. “An *Amazon* is a feral female Immortyl, masculine in demeanor.”

Dirk snickered and put his feet up on another chair. His master glared at him and he promptly removed them. Gaius picked up the latest scientific journal Ethan had assigned me from the marble console and flipped through the pages. “Hardly the romantic nonsense one would expect of a lady of leisure.”

“Ethan is distressed by my lack of higher education— fascinating stuff actually, all about the building blocks of life. Ethan’s sure the clues to our mystery lie within.”

“A most intriguing theory. Perhaps you’ve heard of a certain heretical Immortyl called Kaspar?” I shook my head. “Your Lord has never bothered to teach our history as part of your education? Thirty years ago, this amateur biologist made a study of our blood under the microscope, looking for some clue to our unique gifts. He experimented on mortals, to see how much blood it actually takes before the transformation is complete, and transfused them again with the blood of other mortals to see if the change could be reversed. Of course he failed and was killed by those he’d inadvertently created. Kaspar’s alphas complained to Kalidasa of the misbegotten Immortyls. They were destroyed and the GC decreed it heresy for Immortyls to dabble in science. Ethan has sorely neglected your education in our customs. Do you even pay tribute to Kali Maa, who endowed us with immortality?”

“Isn’t she some Hindu goddess?”

He chuckled. “She descended from the heavens, in a blaze of light to give her servant Kalidasa her immortal kiss— so he says.”

“You don’t buy into it?”

“Heresy will never escape my lips.”

Me and my big mouth. “Ethan won’t get into trouble?”

“I don’t make it my business to make petty accusations to the Chief Elder concerning the *forbidden science*.”

Dirk shifted in his seat, obviously bored and craving attention, disagreeable child that he was. “I say we do her.”

Gaius growled, “Be silent!”

Dirk leaned forward. “He lusts after your innocence.”

“Another word and I won’t bring you again. Her master isn’t a trifling sort.”

Dirk snorted. “For heaven’s sake, she’s his whore. Her function is to please. We both find her pleasing, what’s to stop us? You could have her just by saying the word. He’d give her to you to prevent a breach between our houses.”

“Shut up.”

Dirk yawned. “He’s trying to charm you away. It gets him up.”

“Lord Gaius understands a woman is won with subtlety and finesse which you’re as sorely lacking as you are in intellect.”

Gaius laughed out loud as Dirk seethed silently in his chair. “You shut him up. What a neat trick. Tell me your secret?”

“Use words he can’t understand.”

“Bitch,” Dirk muttered.

“That’s one he does.”

“He’ll regret his rudeness. This little blossom is worth two of you, Dirk. Her mind is sharp as her tongue yet she gives respect where it is due. You

would be wise to follow her example. You lack subtlety. One day it will get you into trouble and I will not be there to bail you out.”

“She’d better show respect. She’s nothing, a man’s toy.”

“If you truly believe so then you *are* a fool.”

“She’s the fool letting us in here like this. We could drag her out to the car and he’d never know what became of her. Say you aren’t tempted.”

“He’d know exactly where to look. Such an act would invoke bloodshed. If rape has its charms for you practice it on mortals not on one of the blood.”

Dirk laughed. “I’ll make her squirm someday.”

“Dirk is utterly without common sense. A little *persuasion* however works wonders with him.”

Dirk cringed. Just what did Gaius do that frightened him so? Personally, I didn’t care how severely he’d suffer. As far as Dirk was concerned, death was too good for him.

Gaius spied a piece of Etruscan pottery Ethan had picked up cheap from an impoverished aristocrat he met playing cards. He picked it up and rolled it back and forth in his hands with an expert’s air. “Exquisite.”

“You must have fascinating tales to tell Lord Gaius, of Rome...”

Gaius raised an eyebrow at my forwardness, but laughed and replied, “It was long ago. What I remember I may have read in books, or seen in the pictures. I could tell about battles and life in camp. I spent most of my mortal existence a soldier. I’m not sure if you’d find it interesting.”

“How did people think then? That’s what I’d really like to know.”

“I’d rather talk about how you think. Now there’s a riddle.”

“You’re being evasive, my Lord.”

He set down the vase and turned back to me. “I’ll tell you this. I knew fascinating women of power and education. We didn’t shut our women away like other peoples, like the Greeks. I dined with Tiberius’s mother Livia, and survived to tell the tale. She was the brains behind the empire and woe to any who stood in her way.” He turned back to Dirk. “Mark me Dirk. Respect the fair sex. They’re capable of destroying fools like you. You’re not so easily dismissed as Dirk believes.”

“What on earth is so special about me?”

“You’re the Bird of Prey.”

“Uh-huh, now tell me in words even Dirk can understand.”

“Cunt,” Dirk said.

“There’s another, thank you, Dirk.”

Gaius threw back his head, laughing. “Ethan is the luckiest man I know to have uncovered you. Ah, when the Northman sees you he’ll spit with rage.”

My blood ran cold. Why? A car approached, large, sleek and formidable, just like Ethan. Gaius clammed up, taking a seat in a chair and striking a casual pose. Dirk glared at me, plotting my future ravishment behind yellow-green eyes.

Ethan opened the door and flashed a look at me that said that I’d better have a good explanation. Gaius sat back in his chair and waited for Ethan to do the dance.

Ethan bowed to him. “Lord Gaius, sorry I wasn’t here to greet you, I had business in Naples.”

“We’ve also business to discuss.”

Ethan flinched. “We’ll go to the terrace. Can he be trusted?”

Gaius looked to me, a smile softening his face. “I wouldn’t worry about her. She’ll outwit this dolt every time.”

Ethan stared Dirk down. “If he touches her, I’ll take his head.”

Gaius replied casually as he paused at the door, “It’s almost worth the trouble.”

Nothing gave me the creeps more than being left alone with Dirk. There was no sense of control of the situation. He wasn’t intellectually gifted but he was endowed with animal cunning, superior strength and a total disregard for anyone’s rights.

“What I endure,” Dirk muttered.

I opened the carved chest against the wall to put my materials away.
“Doesn’t think much of you, does he?”

He scowled, lurching to his feet. “Not as much as you think of yourself.”
He hovered over me, trying to intimidate by sheer size and bulk.

“You don’t scare me.”

Moving in closer he breathed down my neck, “Did you dream of me in your childhood bed?”

Nightmares actually, of human skeletons trampled by jackboots, grinning death’s heads on black caps, skulls that came to life with yellow-green eyes. Dirk’s ilk had been considered the elite of the Third Reich. Himmler himself had hand picked them from photographs, not one could stand less than five foot eight, they had to be proven racially pure as far back as eighteen hundred and they possessed the idealized Nordic physical attributes most of their leaders lacked. Except for the yellowish eyes, Dirk was the poster boy.

He tugged hard at my hair. “I’ll teach you the meaning of pain.”

“Let go of me, mindless butcher.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and looked me over from head to toe.
“You aren’t that much to look at.”

“Good enough, your distaste is showing all too prominently.”

He grabbed my jaw. “Can this mouth do anything other than fling insults?”

“Not unless you want to lose something very dear to you. Let’s test your powers of regeneration. I’m curious if you are.” I twisted out of his grip, a move Ethan taught me.

“Gaius made an offer for you to Brovik when we saw him in Rome.”

“Brovik? What kind of offer?”

“To buy you of course—for me.”

I was flabbergasted. The door opened and Ethan and Gaius stepped inside. Ethan frowned, looking about the room curiously.

Gaius barked, “Dirk come.”

After they left I was called upon to explain myself. Ethan paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. “Are you mad? Letting them in?”

“You told me to be polite to him.”

“You can’t be so incredibly naive. It’s a good thing it was Gaius and not some other. He knows better than to try something.”

“So, what did Brovik have to say? Dirk told me they’d seen him in Rome. He said Gaius made an offer for me.”

“Don’t be frightened. You’re not going anywhere.”

“Is he coming here?”

Ethan shook his head. “He wants us to go to Norway.”

“Will we go?”

“No. You must be prepared when at last you meet him face to face.”

“Why?”

“He’ll reach inside and pluck your soul from within, without a blink of an eye— all the while with the most serene and beautiful of smiles on his fair countenance.”

“What does he want?”

Ethan kissed my forehead. “Just business— nothing you need worry about, my dear. Now run upstairs and get ready for bed. I must make a call.”

I obeyed as usual, but this patronizing treatment was really staring to irritate. He told me nothing, like I was a child. How bad could this Brovik be?

EIGHT

* * * *

If there were others in this house of ours, Ethan never told me about them, but Brovik apparently was curious about me, and sent his first emissary just a few months after our arrival.

We stood on the balcony, my head against Ethan's bare chest, his arms wrapped loosely about my body. Twilight is called *Magic Hour* in the movies and so it was, the closest we ever came to standing in the sun, a moment of connection for us, silently drinking the beauty of the surrounding hills and bay, purple streaked with orange, watching day winding down and night stirring.

Suddenly *Magic Hour* was interrupted by the sound of a small sports car whining up the steep road. Ethan cocked his head to the side. "Get my robe."

I went inside, grabbing his heavy silk robe and pulling on a simple dress before joining him again on the balcony. "Gaius?"

"No, come here," he whispered, smiling.

The car pulled into the drive in front of the villa and parked. I scented the newcomer now, male Immortyl mixed with nice cologne. His feet hit the ground lightly as he jumped from the car, gravel crunching under his feet as he stealthily crept up on us. Something scraped the tiles on the roof.

"Look up," Ethan instructed, tilting my head back to look up at the red tiled roof.

Sitting gracefully among the tiles was a tall figure brushing dust off of his leather jacket. A tumble of neglected dark curls framed a face brimming with malevolent mischief. "These tiles are loose. You ought to have them

looked at,” he said, in a British accent, sending one crashing down toward our heads.

Ethan ducked us out of the way, laughing.

The stranger landed beside us. “You’re in a sad state, Byron.”

“One can’t remain a vagabond forever.”

“Let’s have a look at you then, love,” our visitor said, moving about me in an exaggerated imitation of a horse trader. “Not quite your usual wine my friend, still an intoxicating libation. Local vintage?”

“American grown from old European stock.”

“Intriguing blend of flavors. Is she mute?”

Ethan laughed. “I should be so fortunate.”

I had to speak up. “To his unending delight, I have a tongue.”

“Mia, this is Philip. It’s all right, this one doesn’t bite.”

I offered my hand. He made a show of bowing and kissing it. “Your devoted slave, madam. Exactly what you need, Beatrice to your Benedick—she’ll keep you on your toes arrogant monster. And she hasn’t been presented yet?”

“We’ll discuss this *later*.”

“Keeping secrets? Not a wise idea, they develop a diabolical habit of listening at keyholes.”

“Later, Philip.”

“As you wish, there’s an eternity for the dreary business I’ve been sent for, besides I want to know this fascinating creature better. Where *did* he scare you up, wench?”

“The theater, I was an actress.”

“At last!” he proclaimed. “Another in this deadly dull company who understands life! A tedious lot, Mia— except for our Kurt—he’s an *artiste* if of a silent disposition. I don’t wonder Ethan keeps you far from him. You’d fall for his amazing, azure eyes.”

“Philip,” Ethan said.

“Don’t be a bore, Ethan. We’re going out to peruse the menu! There’s a perfectly luscious bellboy at my hotel. Are they all so delicious?”

Ethan shook his head. “Show him around while I’ll dress.”

Philip offered his arm, leading me into the bedroom. “Pity we can’t linger...”

“She’s not your flavor,” Ethan jibed.

Philip paused before the mirror to give a perfunctory run of fingers through his curls. “One enjoys a departure from the usual and Southern cuisine has a certain spice in either flavor.”

“And the North?” Ethan challenged.

Philip struck a pose. “Substantial fare, but much too heavy on the palate.”

That broke them both up.

“Where’d you two meet?” I asked.

Philip’s brown eyes widened. “Haven’t you told her *anything*?”

Ethan cleared his throat. “Philip and I are... brothers.”

I looked from Ethan to Philip and then back again. “Brovik made you both?”

Philip wrapped his arm about my throat, pulling me close to him. “She invokes the name of the deity, how shall we punish her?”

“Lock her in a room with you for a few hours. Your punning will turn her into a mass of jelly.”

Philip dipped me backward like a tango dancer. “She’ll forget you, I guarantee it.”

Ethan smiled smugly. “Somehow I doubt it. You’re going to stay here?”

“I’m at the hotel.”

“I won’t have it said I didn’t offer hospitality to my own blood.”

“Very well, you’ve convinced me.”

I took Philip’s arm. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

The villa was small and it didn’t take long. Philip questioned me about my origins in the theatre and how I liked Italy. He was relaxed and humorous. I adored him from the first.

“Lovely house,” he commented. “Very congenial.”

“It’s lonely,” I said. “I’m glad you’ve come.”

He wrapped his arms about me. “It can be a cold world for us. It’s good to find friends.” He bent his head close to my ear. “There’s another anxious to befriend you.”

Ethan descended the stairs, dressed in a fine, dark suit. “Corrupting her?”

“You’d be disappointed if I didn’t.” Philip suddenly grimaced. “You aren’t wearing *that*? We’re going for a leisurely stroll through town to absorb the local color not a night at the opera. How do you expect to mingle?” Philip shook his head in disgust. “This hackneyed image, the suave aristocrat with the deadly secret— you’re not happy unless women drop at your feet as you walk by.”

“This is as dressed down as he gets,” I put in.

“Quick Mia, muss his hair, loosen his tie, make him *appear* a mere mortal!”

“Impossible,” Ethan drawled. “You’ll do nothing of the sort,” he warned me as my hand reached out to his freshly clipped, smoothly combed black hair.

“It’s so sexy when that lock of hair strays into your eyes.”

“He’s beyond help, Mia.” Philip offered his arm. “Come, we’ll have a good time in spite of Lord Ruthven. You must promise to show me the lifeblood of this place. He wouldn’t understand.”

“Ethan always knows where to find that.”

Our eyes met for a moment. Philip looked about to say something.

“See Philip, completely besotted, dull as I am.”

Philip stood there shaking his tousled head. “There are stars in her eyes yet. Wait until she figures you out monster. Lovers— how hopelessly banal— these dreary triangles, the old ones, the alphas, the little ones, all bound together in a ghastly morass of obsession.”

“Don’t you ever stop?” Ethan interrupted.

“Only at sunrise, when the cock crows, I cease to. We’ll take my car.”

“It’s a two-seater,” Ethan complained, as we stood in the drive, surveying the sharp little Bugati parked there.

Philip’s smile was all sweet viciousness. “Put her on your lap, I’m sure that she’s well acquainted with it.”

The saying is, “See Naples and die.” At this time, she was still badly scarred by the war, but valiantly rallying to her feet, with one of the most beautiful natural settings, yet the worst slums in the Old World. Crime was a way of life, commerce a bustling street bazaar of oriental proportion. The Greeks first settled in the hills above the bay, naming their city *Parthenope*

after the mythological Siren. I for one appreciated the irony of the city's origins.

We spent a lively evening in Naples at a jazz club with the loquacious Philip who, as it turned out was, in his former incarnation, an actor of Elizabethan vintage, which naturally sparked my curiosity. I asked if he knew Shakespeare and Marlowe, had he ever seen Gloriana herself?

Philip's syllables came trippingly off of his agile tongue, "Why would a magnificent butterfly want to remember life as a lowly caterpillar? Bad food, plague, and cutthroats on the roads we traveled, not to mention the stigma of my profession— what did I have left— another ten, fifteen years if I was lucky? Brovik was a *god*. I'm eternally grateful to him."

"He's as much of a liar as the rest," Ethan said, with a snide little smile.

"This is where your ravishing protector and I part company, Mia. He's far too wrapped in his mortal raiment. Wear the mask by all means, especially if it's so diabolically appealing in design, find the role you are most comfortable playing... "

"The fool in your case," Ethan said.

"Motley is the only wear. Give no offense— yet speak the truth. You'd be wise to follow my example, Mia. Ah, there's that waiter again."

We stayed out as long as we dared until false dawn lightened the sky, but still Philip rose early the next evening to go out. When he returned, I bounded out to meet him. He'd fed. His pallor was deeper, cheeks fresh and pink, looking even handsomer than the night before. The dark curls were neatly brushed, looking quite respectable by Ethan's standards, but his suit was flashier, his tie louder and his manner anything but subdued. He leapt out of the car and landed on his feet before me, sweeping me into his arms in a parody of a passionate embrace. "Mia, come away to Venice and leave your moth-eaten lover to pine!" I burst into laughter. He released me, and I took his arm as we headed off to the house. "Where's the old monster?"

"Reading."

“Some boring philosopher, I’ll reckon?”

“Poetry, actually.”

“There’s *some* hope for him.” He burst through the door. “Sound the trumpets for my entrance!” He made a deep flourishing bow. “Good evening Ruthven—or is it Byron?”

“Do I hear bells?” Ethan said, not looking up from his book.

“Aye, they toll for thee, ungrateful son of the blood,” Philip said, ominously creeping up behind Ethan’s chair.

“Where have you been?”

“In search of the ravishing waiter from last night—*Vincenzo*.” Philip reclined on the sofa Mark Antony style, as I draped myself around the back of Ethan’s chair. “As you see, I took a page from Ethan’s book and dressed to dazzle his mortal eyes.”

“That tie *is* blinding,” Ethan commented.

“Somber weeds are for mournful Calibans like you. I’m a spirit of the air!”

Ethan smirked. “From ear to ear that is.”

“Go on,” I urged Philip.

Ethan glanced up from his book. “Ten-thousand lira, he let him go.”

Philip ignored him and continued to elucidate on his conquest, “I again descended to the temple of Jazz, and spirited lovely, young Vincenzo away to a small hotel.”

“No mean feat, considering how you terrified him last night,” Ethan remarked.

“I expressed my admiration for his breathtaking beauty.”

Ethan smirked. “And his soon to be corrupted innocence.”

Philip sighed, contentedly, as he sank back against the sofa arm. “He’s simply too delicious to take so soon!”

Ethan shook his head. “Told you so.”

Philip closed his eyes, blissfully smiling, “I shall delay the gratification of my Immortyl desire and enjoy his more earthly charms.”

“He’ll live to a ripe old age,” Ethan interpreted.

Philip grabbed a bunch of grapes from a bowl on the table near the sofa. “If we kill all the beautiful ones what’ll be left?” he asked, as he popped a grape into his mouth.

Ethan watched Philip chew and swallow the fruit. “You have a point.”

“Interested in sharing him?” I proposed.

Ethan was scandalized. “Mia!”

Philip grinned. “*Wicked*— only I don’t think Ethan is keen on it. He wants to keep you to his selfish self.”

“You’re a corrupting influence on her.”

“Your tercel may be hooded and her jesses firmly in your grip, but perhaps she isn’t content to fly for you alone?”

“Mia, what do you have to say about this?”

“He’s my life,” I said, with proper awe.

“They all say that at first. That is all I’ll say on the subject. A little brotherly advice, little brother.” He snatched up Ethan’s volume of poems and declaimed loudly about the room, “What’s this rubbish? Dylan Thomas? How very *moderne* of you Ethan! *Rage, Rage against the dying of the light.*” He convulsed into laughter. “Melancholy monster! What a picture

you are, looks that any of us would open our veins to have, even this handsome devil pales in your shadow, a lover of legendary prowess, even among us... Am I correct Mia?"

"Assuredly."

"The wits and ability to take whatever he wants, which he does without scruple... A deadly killer, a remorseless predator."

Ethan grinned. "Stop reciting my virtues."

"I'm through— have a little modesty. All of this as well as a sensual morsel of a child who loves him without question and still he broods. Living corpse!" Philip made a cross with his fingers, wailing like a banshee. "*Nosferatu-u-u!*"

I collapsed on the sofa laughing so hard tears came.

Philip gestured to me dramatically. "Look at that! Is that a dead thing? She laughs, she cries, her flesh is warm."

"So it is," Ethan mused

"Arrgh! Nineteenth century ghouls with your graveyard poets and gothic tales, you're all obsessed with death!"

"*Life's but a walking shadow.* I believe those words were written in your day?" Ethan chided.

Philip grinned. "*A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*"

I giggled. "Must you quote the Scottish play?"

Philip heaved me up over his shoulder. "Pardon me, as I carry this female bastard hence and bear it to some remote and desert place quite out of our dominions."

I laughed but as he recited the passage I had a premonition— this was what Leontes said when he banished his daughter Perdita in A Winter's Tale.

“And that thou should leave it without more mercy

to its own protection and favor of the climate.

As by strange fortune it came to us

I do in justice charge thee on thy soul’s peril and thy body’s torture

that thou commend it strangely to some place where chance might nurse it or end it.”

Philip carried me out the back door to the terrace, dumping me unceremoniously into the fountain. “Your baptism, lady!”

Shrieking and sputtering I leapt from the water, diving at him full force. It was like hitting a brick wall, but he fell backward off of his feet and crashed to the pavement stones. We laughed and wrestled, as I tickled him.

“Ethan help, your falcon has mistaken me for prey!”

Ethan stood over us, shaking his head. “Mia, do act like a lady. Let him go. He’s not man enough for you.”

“I can take on a dozen like her a night,” Philip boasted, pinching me extravagantly on the bottom.

“But you don’t.”

“That’s fine talk coming from *you*. I *like* her... She’s divinely endowed high and low.” He rolled over top of me. “Shall we make the beast with two backs?”

“You aren’t fit for polite company,” Ethan scolded.

I scrambled from beneath Philip, announcing loudly, “I’m going in to change.”

Philip sighed. “Like a *Directoire* beauty— frock all wet and clinging.”

“You’re a libidinous nightmare,” I told him.

I went upstairs and threw on a new dress, before I went downstairs to join them, finding them looking out at the moonlit bay from the terrace, chatting. Then Philip said something really interesting.

“The money will be wired shortly. Find out all you can.”

“Quiet. We’re watched sometimes. Dirk’s being positioned for second in command. The alphas uniformly hate him but Gaius keeps him close.”

“Thoroughly nasty sort.”

“Worse. He’s got his eye on Mia.”

“Gaius pesters Brovik for her. Let this play out. She could be the key for us. Brovik could put Dirk’s obsession to good use. Careful though— we don’t want her hurt.”

“I wouldn’t allow that.”

“I could stay here on this terrace under the moon, smelling the perfume of these roses forever.” Philip sighed and looked over the water. “The view here is magnificent at twilight.”

“One wonders how it is by day.”

“You two are a picture of melancholia,” I said.

Ethan lovingly swept his eyes over me. “We were admiring the view. It’s brightened considerably with your presence.”

“Here... a present,” Philip said, presenting me with an antique mandolin. “The poor child needs amusement. You know— she might take to piano. I know an excellent tutor.”

“Bit far to travel for lessons.”

“Afraid of other lessons she might learn?”

“From the master perhaps—not the apprentice—that would really surprise me.”

Phillip took the mandolin and sat down on the stone bench, strumming it.
“Nevertheless, you must go.

“Oh mistress mine where are you roaming?

Oh mistress mine, where are you roaming?

Can’t you hear your true loves calling?

Who can sing both high and low?”

“Philip, please,” Ethan begged. “Cease, your noise.”

“He has a fine voice!” I protested.

“You see—this one has taste.”

“Sing something else,” I pleaded.

Philip cocked his head and changed keys, singing mournfully.

“Fortune my foe, why dost thou frown on me?

And will my favors never greater be?

Wilt thou, I say, forever breed me pain?

And wilt thou not restore my joys again?”

Ethan snatched the mandolin away. “Enough, unless you’d like to sport this over that obscene tie. Put it away before he sings again.”

I took the instrument inside, and then joined them on the terrace again. Philip now reclined picturesquely on the balustrade, admiring a rosebud

he'd plucked. "Did you ever see such a garden?"

"Not since Eden," I replied.

Philip smiled, dangling his fingers on the paving stones and pulling out moss that grew between the cracks. "Our Eve is certainly destined to bring about the fall. She'll not rest until she's eaten of the tree of knowledge."

"Indeed," Ethan answered, leaning gracefully against a column with folded arms over his chest. "She's sparred with Gaius."

"The old Wolf? She is bold. She knows about that lot?"

"I enlightened her."

"What do you think of him, Mia?"

I made a face. "Not much."

They laughed.

"If her wits match her audacity, you may have something here."

"Had her wings singed the first time, now she plays him cool and slow."

"Ethan won't take me to meet his women."

Philip sat up, running his hand through his curls. "Oh my dear, you can't be serious? They aren't women. They aren't anything resembling women." A slow hungry smile appeared on his face. "Well, some parts of 'em... "

I challenged him. "And I suppose you aren't men anymore?"

"In Philip's case the jury was decided before it convened," Ethan said, dryly.

"Your slights on my manhood aren't to be borne."

"So if I am an *Immortyl*, I'm no longer a woman?"

Philip looked at me closely, clearing his throat. “There are certain qualities one considers desirable in your sex.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you Philip,” Ethan said, shaking his head.

“Such as?” I insisted.

Philip cast about for an answer, a look of adorable bewilderment on his face.

“Get out of this one, I dare you.”

“You’ve tampered with her mind!”

Ethan laughed, crossing to the bench where I sat and pulling me to my feet. “I assure you she came this way—a new breed, that sees the feminine frills for what they are, useful weapons. I’m her helpless victim.”

“Bullshit!” I broke away and looked out on the bay. The moon was high and full, the waters calm and black along the ribbon of light. I climbed up and walked along the narrow marble balustrade in the manner of a tightrope walker, gracefully maintaining my balance with outstretched arms.

Philip said slowly, “Di-a-bolic.”

“Enlighten me,” I begged.

“You’ve been enlightened far too much. I fear for us all.”

Ethan snatched me up, lifting me high in the air like a ballet dancer. I made an arabesque to show off. “Behold my bird of prey. She’ll topple the idols and see them fall.”

I burst out laughing. “Stop! Ethan has delusions of grandeur. He got this idea from seeing me in that Ibsen play, and gets a thrill from loosing me on mortal men.”

Ethan set me down. “She’s being modest. You should see the gleam in her eye when she kills.”

Philip put his arm around me, whispering in a conspiratorial tone, “Come now Mia, we’re family here. You’re a daughter of the blood. It’s proper for you to be proud of your accomplishments.”

I broke away from him. “You two act as if it’s my drawing we’re talking about.”

“Your drawing is abysmal.” Ethan laughed. I looked at him indignantly. It was a joke; still, I didn’t feel any better about it. Ethan’s jibes always disguised an element of truth and they stung. “She’s getting riled up, look at her eyes, pure fury.”

“I hate when you do this,” I sputtered, heading for house.

Philip laughed as Ethan caught my arm, pulling me to him. “Our world must change—we’ve outgrown the ways of the ancients and must take our place in the world at large. Science will release us from our bondage and we’ll become the *supermen* we’re destined to be.”

I gasped. “You’re crazy!”

“He’s a visionary and they’re often madmen,” Philip commented. “Well, I suppose we must tell her now.”

Ethan held me by the shoulders, looking into my eyes. “Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to men. So shall we.”

He couldn’t be serious? Did he propose that we give immortality to all men? I looked into his frosty eyes and saw he was firm in his purpose. I’d always suspected the mission in his teaching. Didn’t he see the horror of this? “Ethan, we’re made up of degenerates and beasts. You’ve often told me so yourself. If we seize power we have no right to it will be disaster. Besides, you don’t think much of humanity either.”

He calmly took a seat in a carved stone chair. “There are some who have potential to be a god among men.”

“And who’ll decide this? Is one person better than another?”

“The best will shine forth like the stars.”

“The worst also have the habit of glittering in our eyes,” I muttered.

“You’ll be part of this work, Mia.”

Philip ushered me away, holding his arm protectively around my shoulders. “Don’t take his raving seriously. He’s been expounding his anarchy for a century. It’s one of his charming quirks of personality. He keeps me around to deflate his pomposity. You’re frightening the child, Marlovian monster.” Philip ruffled my hair reassuringly. “Listen to reason, she’s not interested in living fantastical dreams for you. A bird of prey is a wild thing that will fly on its own. Unless I’m mistaken, she’ll indeed smash a few idols along the way.”

Ethan shook his head. “You never could understand, Philip.”

“I’m your friend but I’m also the fool who chides you to retain humility arrogant monster. The old one’s plans are not for us to tamper with. Ours is to obey.”

Ethan came back to earth suddenly, laughing. “Perhaps I’m premature. The state of science isn’t yet where it must be.”

“Shall we wait until the millennium then?” Philip asked, with a grin. “Fifty years of bliss before Armageddon to enjoy ourselves?”

They laughed again. I broke away from Philip, to face both of them. “This isn’t funny. Everything he’s taught me is a mass of contradictions. As soon as I think I have it figured out, he throws me a curve.”

“A what?” Philip asked.

“Baseball terminology. You wouldn’t understand. Speak the Queen’s English to our foreign friend, Mia.”

“*You’re* the foreigners.”

Again they laughed.

“I’m serious!”

Philip started for me. “She wants to go bathing again.”

Ethan rose. “I’ll get her feet, you take her arms.”

“Stop it! You’re like two little boys! Don’t I have any say?”

Ethan folded his hands under his chin, leaning back in the chair. “I’d think my ideas would appeal to you.”

“Women always do the opposite of what you’d think,” Philip commented.

I glared at him and he mugged at me, putting a finger to his lips.

“It’s an impossible dream, Ethan.”

“Our very existence challenges the notion of impossibility.”

“Even if we could be cured of this thing, and give the best of it to humanity — who gets the gift?”

“Again I must chide you for your naivete. Nature decides who wins and who loses, not us. They’re not all worthy.”

“In your eyes I’m a princess, to Dirk what am I?”

“Dirk is an aberration.”

“Don’t you see? How far is it from you, or I, or Philip, and one like Dirk? Power in the wrong hands is more than regrettable — it’s indefensible. Power corrupts and each one of us has a monster lurking inside. I see nothing but evil if you tamper with this.”

Ethan wrapped his arms about my waist and drew me to him. “That’s why we won’t leave this to the others.”

“The child has pangs of conscience.”

I tore away. “He’s murdered my conscience. There’s nothing left but doubts, second guesses, and philosophies I don’t understand.”

“Strong words Ethan, you should heed her.”

“She’s not yet tapped her potential.”

I shivered. “As I child, I watched newsreels of corpses bulldozed into pits of lime, and why? Because someone decided he was more worthy of life than his fellow men, and infected others with this disease.”

Philip stood up, stretching his long body. “I grow weary of this philosophical and ethical carousel, and beg to be let off before my poor head aches. My advice Ethan is to enjoy her—or I’ll spirit this Psyche off to young Eros, leaving you to brood in silence.”

“She’d never fall for *that*.”

“You don’t understand women, Ethan.”

Ethan smirked. “No one understands women like I do.”

“Someone needs to teach you humility, and high time.” Philip put his arm about my waist. “Come Mia, let’s dance the night away to the strains of the phonograph and leave poor Byron here to figure out what we already know.”

“And what pray tell would that be?”

He danced me around the terrace madly. “How to live, my pet!”

NINE

* * * *

“Ethan’s bizarre plans for me left me uneasy. I only hoped it was a passing whim and he’d get over it, but somehow I couldn’t believe it. He didn’t bring it up again for the remainder of Philip’s visit. I could only wonder what Brovik would do when he learned.

Philip was just the sort of distraction I needed from Ethan’s constant lessons. He kept us out all night, dancing and haunting nightspots. But I never had a chance to speak with him alone until Ethan was forced to pay a courtesy call on Gaius one early October evening.

“Come to Capri with me,” Ethan urged Philip, as he checked out his appearance in the drawing room mirror.

“I must beg off. I’d much rather stay here with Mia. Gaius’s chamber of horrors holds no charms for me. And those two succubae he keeps—no thank you. I prefer to remain intact.”

“Very well. Behave yourself.”

“I’ll be a good uncle.”

Philip and I went out onto the terrace as Ethan pulled away from the dock in our boat. The garden still dripped with roses, but the air was crisp and cool, with the scent of iron and sugar from the distant slopes of Vesuvius, and the ripened grapes growing there.

“Philip... about Brovik.”

Philip took me by the shoulders, dark eyes fixed on mine. “You’re caught in the middle of a battle that’s been raging for a century. It runs hot and cold with them. Right now is one *very* cold spell.”

“Yet he still works for him?”

“Brovik looks out for us and we pay tribute to him. It’s the way things are done. It started when Brovik took Kurt...”

“Kurt?”

“He was just eighteen when Brovik found him. His entire family was transported to Auschwitz to be gassed, but he’d been sent instead to Dauchau to work. One night Brovik was there, doing business with the commandant, when the boy was dragged out and beaten, nearly to death. Brovik paid a vast sum to take him away from there. Ethan is simply jealous. Brovik dotes on the boy, but Ethan *is* and will always be his favorite. Ethan can only play this game with Brovik for so long. Sooner or later he always goes back to him. When he does, be wary. Trust no one. Nature provided you with this enchanting form—use it. If it means swallowing your pride to survive, do it. It’s a bloody game Mia. Innocents are slaughtered in the playing.”

What could I say? What can you say when you find out the man you love was the lover of another man?

Suddenly a rock dislodged on the hillside. In a blur of movement, Philip leapt, taking hold of the dark figure hiding behind a column. Dirk struggled but Philip’s arm held him fast as an iron bar, his free hand pressing a knife against Dirk’s carotid. “You’ve violated a sacred law, you brute,” Philip said. “Does your elder know you’re trespassing?”

Dirk’s eyes had the look of a trapped animal.

I shuddered. “He must have snuck off as soon as Ethan got to Capri.”

“Call the palazzo. Ethan and Gaius must come immediately. I’ll keep this one out of trouble.”

Philip dragged Dirk into the house, throwing him into a chair with the knife still poised at his throat. I did as I was told, relating the story to a furious Ethan over the phone.

They arrived by boat shortly afterward. Gaius took his usual seat, leaning back, surveying us all as if we were part of his dominion. If he'd asked us to kiss his ring I wouldn't have been surprised. He got right to the point. "I can't blame this fool. She's been made to fascinate and he's weak. Dirk tells me she's allowed liberties."

Dirk elaborated, "She let me touch her."

Ethan grabbed me by the arm. "Tell the truth, Madam!"

"I did no such thing!"

Gaius smirked. "Women are accomplished liars. The innocence of her face is deception itself. Nevertheless, I'll send him to Diego to learn some manners. But If I were you my friend, I'd keep a closer eye on her." He stared down Ethan coolly as he rose. "Brovik will be informed about this matter."

After they left, Ethan called me onto the carpet. "You let him *touch* you? Gaius would be more than happy for you to play their nasty games all the time. I'm sure he has a special place reserved in his dungeon. You've created a problem for me! My orders are to keep close tabs on the Wolf, and now we've offended him. You could have played them for some time, but you were stupid. Haven't I taught you anything?"

"Just to be a whore!"

Ethan grabbed me by the back of the hair. "You have a part to play!"

"To piss Brovik off, because you're *jealous* of Kurt?"

Ethan slapped me across the face. I reeled from the blow.

Philip stepped in between us. "Touch her again, and I'll take her to Brovik myself!"

"This is none of your affair!"

Philip shielded me in his arms. “Strike her and you’ll have me to contend with. I’m capable and you know it.”

Ethan backed off. “Say hello to Brovik’s assassin, Mia. Does his clownish act fool you? This deadly weapon shed family blood before. There was a rebellion. Brovik ordered him to take out the disloyal alphas, but that was centuries before my time.”

Philip sighed. “I told you, child. It’s a bloody game. Ethan is right about one thing. You can’t alienate the Wolf. We need to stay in his good graces, until we learn what we’re after. We’ve reason to think he’s building a laboratory. Kurt has contacts among the rats. They see everything. Brovik sent me here to alert Ethan. This *still* may work to our advantage.” Philip and Ethan exchanged a meaningful look that worried me. “Just do all Ethan says, and everything will be fine.”

It was the beginning of the end. A Nordic chill had extinguished some of the heat between Ethan and me. Philip left us soon after the incident with Gaius. When he said goodbye, I clung to the only link I had to anything other than Ethan, begging him to stay.

“I have a summons from the hall of the mountain king to attend him now that he’s in winter residence,” Philip said.

“And you always speak so highly of him,” Ethan commented.

“It’s the *mise en scene* I object to, snow, ice and forests primeval.”

Philip brushed my tears away. “Ethan wants you back to himself, child. Look, she still sheds tears.” He caught them on the tips of his fingers, looking at them in wonder, “*Like winter’s drops...*”

“*And you who are but air, can you have one thought, one feeling for their afflictions?*”

“Always were you’re concerned little one. Any message, Ethan?”

Ethan shook his head, and they embraced. I lingered for a moment, after Ethan went inside.

Philip chuckled. “You have question marks in your eyes, little one.”

“About Kurt...”

A smile slid over Philip’s face. “Don’t be surprised if Brovik sends him from time to time bearing messages.” He slipped an envelope into my hand. “Read this sometime when you’re alone.” He kissed me on the cheek, sighing. “I must fly. *Ciao.*”

Jumping into his Bugati, he revved up the engine, waved and sped away. Knowing Ethan would be closeted in his study for hours, I sat on the stone steps of the villa and opened Kurt’s letter. It was phrased in an oddly charming, old-fashioned, formal way. I tried to conjure what he looked like from Philip’s descriptions. All I could imagine was an angel...”

Mia stared toward Kurt’s cell. Joe stretched and asked, “So Brovik had labs and stuff even back then?”

She shook her head.

“When?”

“Later.”

In this mood he wouldn’t get much out of her, and he was already exhausted and ready to call it quits. “We can end here—have anything for Kurt tonight?”

She held out an envelope. He stuffed the letter in his pocket, half tempted to go and steam it open to decipher the code, but Kurt would know, and in any case, code devised by that shrewd little cherub would be impossible to crack.

A few seconds later, Joe was at Kurt’s door. The vampire sat playing softly, blond head slightly bent over the keys, not looking up as the door whooshed open. “Yes Doctor?”

Tchaikovsky, a ballet, what was it? A familiar theme, *The Dying Swan*.

Joe hugged the doorway, something warned him not to venture too close.
“A letter, I’ll just set it on the table and go.”

Kurt looked up and regarded Joe’s face. Apparently satisfied by what he saw he murmured, “Still no computer, Doctor? I’ve made several requests now. They’re wasting their time. No one is ever going to access anything.”

Joe cleared his throat. “Lydia stonewalls me. She suggests I speak to Lee Brooks myself.”

Kurt’s eyes became focused and sharp. “You’re meeting with her?”

“I’m trying to set it up. I’ve e-mailed her, but she never answers. Lydia will remind her when she sees her next.”

“I wish to speak to her myself—if you’d kindly arrange it. And could you bring me the major newspapers? I’d like to know what’s happening outside.”

Joe nodded as he punched the code at the door. “I’ll see to it.”

“You look awful Doctor. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“No. I feel like hell.” Did he see a faint smile on Kurt’s face as his head bent once more to the instrument? “What are you telling Mia to do in these letters?”

“You think she does as I tell her? You obviously haven’t learned anything in your sessions with her.”

“You influence her.”

Kurt flashed his chilling smile. “I simply remind her of why we’re here.”

“And that is?”

“None of your affair.”

“What the hell is going on here exactly?”

Kurt didn’t even blink. “Do you play chess, Doctor?”

“Chess? What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“I like chess. Play with me.”

“I don’t have time for games.”

Kurt shrugged, and went back to playing. “Get me a board. Maybe we’ll talk.”

TEN

* * * *

Late the following afternoon, Joe looked up to see Lydia at his door, not dressed in a lab coat, but wearing a chic red suit, smelling of expensive perfume. The soft light of the desk lamp made her almost appealing. “Talk to you for a moment, Joe? I spoke with Lee on the phone. She’s planning on touring the facility at the end of the month. She’ll meet with you then. She made a point of asking for some discs Mia promised.”

Joe leaned back in his chair, rubbing his tired eyes. “You never mentioned any discs. It’s wasn’t easy to win her trust. What’s she going to think when I start pressuring her to give them up?”

“Come on Joe, I’m under the gun. There’s some kind of data they promised.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Go in and talk to her *tonight*.”

Joe ran his eyes up Lydia’s figure. “Going on a date?”

Lydia tittered, perhaps a little self-consciously. “Just a meeting with Lee, no time for a social life these days...”

Joe stretched and yawned. “Tell me about it.”

“Has she told you anything about who is hunting them?”

“No. She’s stalling for some reason.”

Lydia sighed in frustration. “Lee believes this isn’t the only facility where this work is going on. We’ve tried to maintain secrecy, but non-disclosure clauses are only as good as the people who signed them. Someone out

there's throwing a lot of money around and it's only a matter of time before we lose people. I've had offers myself from mysterious sources. No one would offer that kind of money unless they were on to something really big. There's a firm in Florida that manufactures blood products, lately there's been a lot of activity."

"All this crap she's telling us is worthless. Maybe if we put our two lovebirds together they'll start to sing."

"Lovebirds are highly territorial, aggressive little monsters, Joe. I raised them as a child. They may look all cute and cuddly but put one in a cage who isn't part of their flock and they'll tear it to bits. Lee's adamant about keeping them apart until she gets here."

"Sounds to me like it's personal."

"We've been through this a hundred times."

Joe scowled. "We're playing a dangerous game here."

"You've never been one to back down from a challenge."

"Speaking of games, Kurt wants to play chess with me next time we meet."

"Do it tonight! For goodness sakes Joe, he's showing receptivity. I still can't find anyone who can get past the firewalls in that computer of his. Get him *anything* he wants. We need that data."

"I'm tired Lydia, give me a fucking break. I'll go see them, but right now I'm going to sleep for a couple of hours before I go to her."

"Get those discs!"

Lydia stalked out as Joe stretched out on the sofa. Jean stuck her head in. She was dressed in street clothes. "You almost ready?"

Shit, he'd forgotten they were supposed to see a movie and have dinner. "Can we do it tomorrow night? Lydia just ordered me to go in and bug Mia about some data they've promised."

Jean's wide mouth formed a tight line. "Last time it was something else. Forget it. I'll go myself."

"Jean..." But she was already out the door.

A few hours of sleep later, Joe handed Kurt's latest letter to Mia. She sat quietly, reading it as he sank into his usual chair.

"Lydia is meeting with Lee Brooks tonight and asked me to come in and talk to you, even though we're not scheduled until Friday. She's coming here in a few weeks. I'll get the chance to finally talk to her. None of us have ever seen her. Only Lydia ever speaks with her. I tried e-mail, voice mails, but she never returned my messages. It's not Lydia doing all this. It's her and I can't figure out why."

Mia looked at him for a long time, saying nothing.

"Kurt wants to play chess with me."

The slightest smile crossed her face. "He'll beat the pants off of you."

"I don't care if I win. He's interesting to talk to— when he talks."

"I'd give anything for a walk under the stars with him."

"You know the rules."

Her dark gaze turned fully upon him, an attractive edge of malice lighting her up. "I live to break rules." She went into the bathroom to destroy the letter and flush it.

"Lydia asked for some discs."

"Discs?"

"Don't fuck with me, Mia. You promised to deliver things you haven't."

She just shook her head.

“So, I guess you’re not going to tell me where they are?” He knew from her resolute expression she wouldn’t relent. “But you said your house was wrapped up in scientific research early on?”

“I didn’t know to what extent as Ethan kept me in the dark.”

Joe sighed. “Well, since I’m here we might as well get on with this ridiculous profile.”

“Your girlfriend looked pissed off when she came in to remove those beastly censors from my head when I woke up.”

“I told you the subject is off limits.”

“You’re not the first man with a bit on the side.”

“I’ll thank you not to refer to Jean in that manner.”

“Been that bit myself.”

“Mia. We have work to do!”

“Jeeze. Don’t bite my head off.”

“Just tell me about what Brovik was up to.”

“I didn’t hear anything for a long time—then he sent another emissary.” Her expression grew soft. “That second summer in Italy was the most beautiful I’d ever seen—roses covering the villa, cascading over the terrace in falls of deep crimson. Breezes off the bay cooled the air, making the heat less hellish than the daytime hours when we slept, the perfect time for *amore*.

Ethan was inside on the phone and I on the terrace cutting roses, laying them in a large wicker basket, singing a *canzone di Napoli*, when a pebble hit the terrace. Ethan had schooled me to call him at the slightest disturbance in the night. I tried to ascertain where the pebble-tossing intruder was, when a boy’s voice called out from the shadows, “Mee-ya?”

One of the *rats* from the beach, I figured. Backing slowly toward the house, I assumed a fighting stance as Ethan had taught, brandishing my shears as a weapon. “Ethan is inside. I’ll scream. He’ll be on you like a bat out of hell.”

A slight figure vaulted lightly onto the balustrade. Moonlight fell on a face as delicately white as the Dresden statue Selena kept on the mantelpiece when I was a girl. Huge star sapphire eyes caught the light. I froze, thrilled and shaken by this serendipitous pleasure.

It wasn’t an arrow that did it. That sort of rude assault was never his way. Eros, that diminutive god of love, roused this drowsy Psyche abruptly from her slumber with a small, sad smile.

His feet touched the pavement noiselessly as he leapt down beside me. This was no rat. His honey-colored curls were well tended and he was dressed in a fine, blue shirt, open at the neck with spotless buff trousers. He was also somewhat older in mortal years, small, but fully-grown. No, this celestial apparition wasn’t cast-off, but someone’s beloved possession.

“I had to see you just once,” he whispered. “I’ll go round front—no trouble.”

He was everything Philip had said, and then some. I gasped, “Kurt?”

He nodded solemnly. “A message for Ethan. Brovik doesn’t trust the telephone.”

Questions flooded my brain faster than this silent creature could have possibly answered them. “Where is he? Is he coming?”

He shook his head, slipping a small beautifully bound book out from his pocket and into my hand. Our fingers brushed and lingered. “Goethe, a decent translation, but you should really read it in German someday. Faust. You know it?” I shook my head. The bittersweet smile lit up his eyes. “Write me what you think.”

“I will.” I don’t know what I’d imagined but somehow he was everything I could, perfection in miniature, his ethereal elegance worlds different than

Ethan's animal sensuality, making my master seem somehow overdone.

He started, withdrawing his hand. "He's coming."

I hid the book in my basket as Ethan came out onto the terrace. He took one look at Kurt and scowled. "What in hell's name are you doing here? Mia, you should have called!"

Kurt spoke up to defend me, "I just arrived."

"Hand it over and clear out."

Kurt reached into his pocket, pulling out a folded envelope. Ethan snatched it away, flashing him a look of utter contempt. "Now get out Peter Pan, fly, fly away—"

Kurt scowled back. "I'm not finished. You're to bring Mia and join us on the yacht."

"I work for him. I don't have to socialize with him."

"He's willing to overlook your past insults if Mia is presented properly," Kurt replied, calmly.

"You may both go to the devil. He won't get his hands on her. Tell him, he needn't send his *toy* to keep tabs on us. Let him come if he has something to convey to me." Ethan shoved the envelope into his breast pocket and gave Kurt a once over. "Disgusting—he should've done you a favor and left you to rot in that pit."

Kurt was still young enough for this kind of remark to visibly wound him. I couldn't stand it. "Ethan that's cruel!"

"Don't waste womanly sympathy on this *thing*, my dear."

Kurt winced, but he couldn't say anything in retaliation. He nodded to me. "I'm sorry we won't get to know one another, Mia."

"You'll never get within an inch of her."

Kurt wasn't all that cowed by Ethan. He looked him dead in the eye. "I'll be sure to tell Brovik how *cordially* I was received here."

Ethan put his arm around my waist. "Must be hell to look around and know none of this can ever be yours."

Kurt's eyes furtively met mine.

Ethan laughed. "Is that what he's promised? He promised me the world. It's a sham little man, a dirty, lowdown trick." I pulled away from Ethan, disgusted by this behavior. "Ah, but you've realized that already. Go on now, shoo! Crawl back to your master— on your knees— the way he likes it."

Kurt spied my shears on the bench and snatched them up. He turned to Ethan, crouching, small, but deadly.

Ethan stood his ground calmly. "Come on boy, I dare you. One move and I'll have the perfect excuse to tear you to pieces."

"Kurt, please, he'll kill you. I've seen him do it." A world of pain passed through Kurt's eyes as he withdrew. The shears clattered to the ground.

"Get out, before I change my mind," Ethan said, in a cold, low voice.

Kurt left the terrace by the steps, as dignified as one can muster at five-foot six. I wanted so much to follow and apologize for Ethan's obscene treatment in my own special way.

Ethan turned to me. "*That* is why I can't stomach Brovik's presence."

"He's just a boy, Ethan."

Ethan scowled, grabbing my arm hard. "How do you know so much about him?"

"Philip told me."

"What else did he tell you?"

“For heaven’s sake Ethan, grow up. I’m not a baby. I know the score.”

He pulled back on my hair forcing me to look into his eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

“Let me go! You’re no better than Dirk.”

He put his hands around my throat. Boy, did I fear those smooth, manicured paws. I’d seen what they were capable of. How far could he be pushed before I bore the brunt of his rage? I closed my eyes, repulsed yet powerless to resist as his hands slipped down my body. Christ, I was jelly in his hands. He led me to a dark, terrifying place where my body and soul weren’t mine.

As Ethan’s vampiric centennial drew closer, oh how he brooded, deep black silences a truckload of wisecracks couldn’t penetrate. Looking into the mirror late in April of sixty-three, the thirteenth anniversary of my own immortal birth, I wondered at the woman reflected there. The world grew older, but the mirror reflected skin as childishly unblemished at thirty-three as it was at twenty, breasts that didn’t weigh down with the advance of age or soften in childbirth and a body as firm and smooth as the night my lord took me as his.

What was the thing Ethan placed about my neck? Another collar of slavery, cool and heavy, it caught the light. Deep brown smoke and amber fire burned in spite of its coolness.

“Topazes. To match your eyes.”

I touched my fingertips to the sparkle. “It looks much too expensive.”

He was pleased. “Seventeenth century Venetian, brilliant as the day they were set. You grow more so with each passing night.”

Palaver, more beautiful palaver and I didn’t trust it. “I never change.” I grasped the hand caressing my throat. “Don’t you find this dull?”

“You’re a kaleidoscope shifting into a fascinating new configuration with each turn and bend of light.”

“You’re in for a disappointment somewhere along the line.”

He bent to kiss my throat. “I have another surprise at the dock.”

Moored to our pier was the most beautiful little sailboat. “She’s yours. What will you name her?”

“*Allegra*, after Byron’s daughter.”

He looked at me oddly. “Why would you identify with that poor soul?”

The bay was smooth, the boat barely affected by the tide. The spring night was mild and the sea smelled of salt and iodine, female scent. I lay back on the deck trying to imagine how Ophelia felt when she drowned herself and watching the sky while Ethan watched me. I wasn’t the starry-eyed child he found and transformed. I was a grown woman all-too aware of his demons and mine. The exterior relationship was smooth as the waters of the bay. My lord, cool as always, a vision in cashmere sweater and light wool trousers, black hair falling onto his ice blue eyes. Nothing seemed amiss but tremors rumbled, old Neptune waking up, threatening to capsize us.

I closed my eyes. “Ethan, something is troubling you. Spit it out.”

He reclined next to me, fingers tangling in the waves of my hair spread out on the chair. “When I first saw you onstage my world changed.”

My eyes opened on him. “I’m not that girl anymore. Don’t be hoodwinked by an illusion you’ve created.”

He wrapped his arms about his knees. “Brovik sent a message through Gaius.”

I sat up, surprised that he uttered the name of his maker voluntarily. His eyes veiled as he spoke. “He sends felicitations on the anniversary of your birth. This year is the centennial of my own birth in the blood, come December. Our presence is expected. I can’t put him off any longer.”

My power to veil myself had become highly developed, but inside of me a battle raged, and I feared Brovik’s power to strip away the illusion. My

rival, the one who had stolen Ethan from his wife and children, who Ethan pined for, though never admitted it. Could he reach inside and pluck the soul from me as Ethan had once cautioned, with the most serene of smiles on his beautiful countenance? The demon haunting my dreams was fair as the sun with eyes like the sky I could walk under again. *Who will go with him?* Those words echoed through the dark corners. What did they mean?

Besides the heavy duty, gothic dreams, I spent a good deal of my waking hours wondering about how the antagonist's entrance into our little play would affect the action. Or was I actually the antagonist? Oh yes, that made much more sense. Their story had been in progress for a century. I was the latecomer. And Kurt, where would he fit in? From his letters, I believed I knew him better than I could ever hope to know Ethan. We shared cautious views about this endeavor our house was embarked on, but he had complete confidence in Brovik's motives, while I had deep misgivings about Ethan's.

Early that December, Kurt called on us again. The weather was unusually brisk for this warm climate. Did Brovik exercise power over the north wind? Ridiculous, I chided myself, only fairy tale vampires held power over the elements, but Brovik by this time had achieved mythic proportions in my imagination.

Ethan was already on the terrace when I arrived. Strong wind blew my hair over my face. I scraped it back with my hand. Kurt stood there with a wooden box of some kind in his hands. He smiled his bittersweet smile, bowing according to form, averting his eyes. I wouldn't have this from my dear friend.

I laid my hand on his arm. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected." He looked up to meet my eyes head on. All we knew of one another, and wanted to know, passed through that brief glance.

Ethan snapped, "Mercy's sake, stop goggling like two teenagers! Spit out your message, boy, and go."

Kurt moved briskly forward, presenting Ethan with the small beautifully carved chest. “Brovik sends gifts in commemoration of your centennial, and orders you attend him.”

Kurt stole another glance at me.

Ethan took this in and smiled smugly. “Oh, we’ll come—but on one condition. You’ll make yourself scarce insect, understand?”

Despite his eternally youthful looks, Kurt was thirty-five now, hardly a boy anymore. He replied, firm and unwavering, “If you insist. My regrets, Mia.”

“How dare you address her?”

Kurt bowed and walked deliberately past Ethan, with a look matching the icy wind off the bay. But Ethan just stared out over the terrace for a long time. Then he did something I had never seen before.

Men’s tears are difficult to watch, and I was unprepared for the naked despair scrawled in huge letters across his face. I approached warily. He motioned me away, turning his back on me. Another gust of cold came off the water. I drew my robe tighter about me as I stood there awkwardly. Ethan was in a place I’d never be welcome.

Frightening yet wonderful, to see the tightly wrapped bits of this tidy parcel unravel before my eyes, to finally glimpse the man beneath the vampiric trappings. All the way to Norway he spoke little. Ethan was terrified of airplanes, and Brovik had sent one to fetch us that bounced alarmingly, buffeted by high winds over the North Sea. Maybe the old Northman had some control over the elements after all.

Before morning we dropped down over a frozen expanse of water to a landing strip. The pilot unloaded our bags into the waiting car and opened the doors for us. The driver raced against the sun, even if it would only rise for a brief time. I pulled my black mink tighter around me, chilled by Ethan’s silence, relieved to be on the ground again, but dreading the coming encounter.

Soon, we pulled up to a dock, where a small ferry was anchored. The driver opened the doors for us and carried our bags to the boat, then hurriedly got back into the car and sped away. The blond, bearded giant of a mortal at the boat's helm tipped his cap and spoke cordially in Norwegian. Ethan answered tersely in the same. The boatman smiled as he helped me aboard.

The ferry plowed slowly through chunks of floating ice and fog, to an island that appeared as suddenly as Avalon before my astonished eyes. A house was set high on a hill, bathed in floodlights, a sparkling modernist structure of concrete and glass. This was the home of a vampire of great antiquity? What had I expected, some drafty old castle? Not in Norway in any case. I'd done some exploratory reading when I learned of the patriarch's origins. Viking houses were mostly made of wood and long gone.

Nice guys these Old Norse. They enjoyed drinking from the skulls of their dead enemies and smothering people in peat bogs as an offering to the gods. Female slaves were usually the ones who gave the gods their due. Supposedly their own women held fairly high status in their society, but their pantheon of deities was as much a boys club as the one I was now a non-voting member of. Philip said he liked women. Skewered and roasted, I supposed.

We docked at the Island, and upon disembarking, walked along a stone drive to what appeared to be a tunnel with a large steel door. A hum started up as the door lifted. We entered an underground passage, sort of a large garage with a couple of very nifty cars parked inside. The boatman carried our bags to a small elevator. I glanced up at naked rock above our heads. We were underneath the goddamned hill. Didn't trolls live in caves under mountains? Not the quaint fairy tale trolls like in the *Billy Goats Gruff*, but the giant man-devouring monsters of Norse mythology?

The mortal set down the bags and left, strolling from the cavern and out the heavy steel door. He didn't make signs against the evil eye, or any other such superstitious nonsense. Apparently it was business as usual, and he suspected nothing out of the ordinary about his employer— besides— Ethan gave him a large tip.

Ethan cautioned me to behave myself as we ascended, “Not a word until he addresses you, got it?”

“I know the dance.”

“Not this one.”

Sure, I was terrified. My heart beat frantically, pumping adrenaline through my blood, believe me it was everything I could do not to run away in terror. The moment I’d anticipated and dreaded for so long was upon me. In a moment I’d look on his face, the big cheese, the head demon.

The elevator glided to a stop and the door opened. The elder stood there before us. He wasn’t as tall as Ethan but would have been considered a giant in his time, made somewhat on the same muscular lines as Ethan however. I couldn’t bring myself to meet his eyes but he took my chin firmly in hand and raised my face. I sensed great power, but that was all. He wasn’t letting on anything else.

Trembling, I met his gaze, and was taken aback by what I saw, intensely blue eyes, the impossible blue of a Scandinavian summer sky, curious not cruel, and a smile as benign as Saint Francis feeding the little birds. His lean face was somewhat austere in contrast to the sensuality of Ethan’s, and his pale hair neatly clipped in the current fashion.

Still, the non-threatening appearance didn’t make me feel any better. In fact his very sunniness scared the tar out of me. There is something horrifying about a creature of the night embodying the diurnal in his form, like your destruction just constantly staring you in the face.

A soft, low voice with a hint of a lilt caressed me, “Mia, Ethan’s child. How lovely. I’m Brovik.”

Taking me by the arm, he led me into a large open room with stark white walls and highly vaulted ceilings supported by bleached birch beams. Beautiful warm golden woods were laid in geometric patterns on the floor with hand loomed woolen rugs strewn about. The furniture combined modern and antique, smooth planes juxtaposed with rustic carving. Niches

in the walls held museum quality artifacts—no—better than museum quality. Circlets of gold and drinking vessels of horn, folk art, carvings with ancient runes, beside contemporary works from all over the globe. The centerpiece of the room, however, was a sleek grand piano. That would be Kurt's. How amazing it would be to hear him play it.

Ethan followed behind us silently to the large fireplace along the opposite wall. Did our host plan to throw me in and dispose of me to appease the gods?

“You’re young and feel the cold,” he explained, as if reading my thoughts. “Kurt stacked enough wood in your room to make a good fire, so you’ll be warm.”

He seemed to expect an answer. I was shivering with fear, but I had to answer. Casting down my eyes, I whispered, “Thank you my lord, I’m quite comfortable.”

He half-smiled as if something amused him, and turned his attention to Ethan. He didn’t move to embrace him, standing quiet and reserved, observing us both. “How good to see you, Ethan. Was your journey pleasant?”

Remembering Ethan’s agony on the plane, an imp possessed me to giggle. The look Ethan threw wasn’t pleased.

Brovik chuckled. “Ethan hates airplanes. In spite of all the science and mathematics he studies, he feels the laws of physics and averages are against him.”

Ethan drew himself taller. “I did not come to be made fun of.”

“No, it has been a long time.” Brovik turned back to me with a mischievous gleam in his eye. “Mia, does he lock you away and beat you like Dracula’s brides?”

“Brovik!” Ethan protested.

I replied wryly, “Only when the moon is full.”

Brovik laughed out loud. “You need a sense of humor with Ethan. He takes everything far too seriously. Kurt speaks highly of you. Unfortunately, urgent business called him to London.”

I ventured another look around. The number of windows surprised me. The place was half glass. Sunlight isn’t a luxury we can afford. I could see if mortals lived in this house why they would want sunlight in a place where it was almost non-existent in winter.

“You find my house interesting?”

“I didn’t expect it to be so modern, my lord.”

“Brovik. I don’t go in for silly titles. I prefer modernist architecture. Not a lot of fuss, don’t you agree? You’ll see the rest tomorrow night. I promise to give the full tour but you’ve had a long trip.” He turned to Ethan. “Kurt took great pains to make her comfortable. Let her rest. We must talk.” He embraced me, kissing my forehead. Again he raised my face to his, running his hand over my cheek. His fingertips were smooth and cool on my skin, but I melted in the heat of his eyes. “You’re my blood, as Ethan is my blood. What’s his is mine. Sleep well little one.” He turned to leave. “Ethan, don’t be long.”

Ethan lifted our bags, and started off up a small flight of stairs to a gallery above the main room. I followed. The house had many levels. One staircase led to a room at the top of the house, to which Brovik ascended fluidly. He turned. Our eyes met and we appraised each other in that millisecond. Jesus, he was as Ethan said, with the most serene of smiles on that beautiful countenance, one that could seduce the soul out of you.

Ethan scolded, “Don’t gawk, for heaven’s sake.”

“He’s like one of the old saints.”

“Lucifer is the god of light,” he growled.

“Kind words for the one who gave you eternal life.”

“A gift that should have been given with a caveat. I’m sure you will be enlightened,” he replied, as he opened a door to a spacious comfortable room, one prepared with great care, by loving hands. Pale furniture and a blond wood floor were polished to a high gloss. Sheepskin rugs lay all over, soft and warm for bare feet. Thick down comforters and woven wools covered the large, somewhat low bed. The linens and rugs were all white, blue and pale yellow, just like Brovik.

“Peachy,” I commented.

“He cannot be faulted as a host. I will say that for him. It’s nearly noon. It may still be dark, but you should sleep. Don’t wait for me. “

He brushed by me, without so much as a kiss, out of the door. A key turned in the lock. I went to the door and tried it. It locked from the outside. I crossed to a window and looked out at the frozen *fiord* and the mountains beyond. The Northern lights danced overhead. Waves of color shimmered on the horizon, floating veils of harem dancers, but this place was as far removed from sultry courts of the ancient east, as I was from the mortal world, an odalisque in a fortress of ice.

Machinery hummed and ground, as a curtain of metal came down over my eyes, obscuring the view, as the hatches were battened down against the approaching daylight. I turned away from the window and moved to unpack my things. The large fireplace was unlit. The air was slightly damp and uncomfortable. Despite furnaces roaring below, the temperature was like a morgue. Brovik always preferred the cold.

Matches and kindling were stacked in a large basket on the hearth, so I set about lighting the fire, a necessary skill I’d learned at Caithness. It crackled and hissed and soon the room grew tolerable. Removing my clothes, I placed them neatly on a chest. The smell of wood smoke was satisfying and comforting. I jumped into the bed and dove under the thick down comforters, pulling them up under my chin. As I reached turn off the lamp, I heard raised voices, arguing in a language I didn’t recognize, Ethan passionately protesting, Brovik calmer, but firm. It sounded like Ethan was

being raked over the coals. The argument abruptly ended. I could only imagine how.

The next evening I was awakened by voices in the main room. The pillow beside me was smooth. Ethan never made it to bed— at least not to mine. I rose, quickly bathed and dressed and then sat at the dressing table to brush my hair.

“She’s awake,” Ethan said.

Brovik chuckled low in his throat. “Bring her to my room.”

“Let her hunt first, and we can work up to it. The heat of the kill will overcome any objections.”

A low laugh rippled from Brovik. “In my day they followed their masters to the funeral pyre. You would have enjoyed the rites Ethan. First the girl visited all the man’s kinsmen, and fucked them. It was our duty to show our love for him. We looked forward to funerals in those days.”

“Viking barbarism!” Ethan sputtered. “I don’t want to hear anymore about your quaint customs.”

“You forget the source of your blood, the Norman conquerors. Noble scion of the house of Sinclair, your Victorian sensibilities didn’t trouble you when you tumbled black slaves, my fine lord of the manor.”

“We did not require them to die with us. Damn you, Brovik! You just want to work on her mind with your little games. Funeral pyre indeed.”

“She knows exactly why you made her. All your romantic talk is folderol. Your high-minded plans will eventually backfire. The falcon will turn on her master.”

“You are playing with my mind.”

Brovik only laughed more as Ethan unlocked the door and called, “Mia, are you dressed yet?”

I came to the door, wearing burgundy velvet. Brovik looked up, smiling. “How lovely you look, my dear. I’m very interested in the things Ethan has taught you, and would very much like to see the Bird of Prey in action. We’ll go into town to the theatre, and afterward you can bring down some prey for me, what do you say?”

“I’d be glad to.”

“Ethan will drive,” Brovik said, offering me his arm. “You’ll be enchanted by our little theatre.”

Ethan fetched my mink, draping it over my shoulders. “He built it.”

Brovik helped me with the coat. “To amuse Ethan. He always found it dull here. Our little acting company is quite good. I pay them too, but anonymously. It is a charming town, but nothing compared to Oslo for entertainment. Kurt and I go down frequently for the symphony. You like music? You must hear our Kurt play.”

“I’d like to very much.”

Brovik gave Ethan a meaningful look. “It will be arranged.”

Ethan scowled, but said nothing as he hit the button to the elevator. Brovik continued to engage me in small talk as Ethan got the car. He was very charming, but I was wary about the invitation to his room later. Just what was in store?

After the ferry docked on the mainland, we drove along icy roads to the town and Brovik’s quaint little theatre. The play was Ibsen of course, but not *The Master Builder*, or even *The Wild Duck*, it was *A Doll’s House*. Had Brovik somehow engineered the theatrical season as well? I empathized with Nora’s plight, but I unfortunately couldn’t slam the door on my present condition.

During the performance hunger started pricking at my head. Brovik took note, wrapping his arm around me. “I look forward to this,” he whispered, his warm breath sending a pleasurable shiver down me. “Your senses have

awakened.” I sat between them for the final act, very aware of their bodies next to me, the pressure of their thighs against mine. I glanced from side to side marveling at how amazing they both were, wondering just what would happen after this hunt.

ELEVEN

* * * *

“We took the unconscious victim back to the house and climbed the steps to Brovik’s aerie. Ethan placed the man on the low bed and then turned toward Brovik who dimmed the lights, so that the stars were visible through the glass. He doffed his clothes, and stood quietly off to the side observing as Ethan and I feverishly tore at ours.

The aurora danced overhead, bathing the three of us in its glow. Ethan led me, naked, to Brovik, “What’s mine is yours,” he whispered.

Brovik reached out, caressing Ethan’s face. “How could you deny me what is mine for so long?”

Then their mouths met in a long, deep kiss... ”

Joe stood up, “Whoa Mia! Do we need to go here?”

“It’s pretty important!”

“Go easy on me,” he pleaded.

She smirked. “Ethan led me to the bed where the victim lay sprawled. Brovik glided over, beautiful body shining in the moonlight. The semi-conscious victim, probably thinking he dreamt this, showed no alarm as the three of us surrounded him nude on the bed. Brovik took the victim up in his arms and drank from the throat while Ethan took one arm and bit into the wrist. I nestled into the chest.

After we’d drunk our fill, Brovik carried the body to a small door in the wall and dropped it into a chute. He’d apparently thought of everything when he built the place. He returned to us with his benevolent smile.

They reclined on either side of me, nuzzling at my throat, two mouths on my flesh, two sets of razor sharp points burrowing into me, two pairs of hands caressing my body. They clasped hands above my mouth. I knew what to do. Pulling them to my lips, I tore a gash in both wrists and let the drops intermingle in my mouth.

It defies description, but I'll take a stab at it. First, a veil of black, fluttering, lifting, and then light and color within my very being, like the aurora that flared overhead, flowing in our veins. Two figures emerged from the darkness—one dark, dressed like Hamlet, all in black—the other fair, clad in skins and furs. I'd seen them both before. The dark one spoke honeyed words and called me princess, but the fair one said I belonged to no man. I was like him, a *journeyer*. I was drawn to his enigmatic silence and the eyes full of secrets yet to uncover. I opened to him. Light blazed through me. I plunged headlong into the white-hotness at his core, scorched with exquisite fire.

Now we three were one, burning with the fire of countless suns and distant stars, atoms fusing and dividing, a supernova exploding consumed energy out into space!

We collapsed exhausted, in a tangle of hair and limbs against the sheets. The aurora still floated in eerie red-green silence around us, as their hands moved over me soothing and calming, their lips murmuring words of love. I'll try to put it as delicately, Joe, and not upset your heterosexual sensibilities, but what happened next between the three of us, also opened new horizons. Three bodies make for more variety of combinations, more orifices and delicious hard things to put in them, more hands, more tongues, and under Brovik's exacting demands, I took my knowledge to another level.

Now, I understood Ethan's dilemma. He found it difficult to relinquish control, and in Brovik's hands he was totally disarmed.

During one of these divine combinations, I hovered over Brovik, taking him deep within, as Ethan prepared to penetrate my aft portion. I went over the edge, screaming enthusiasm for Brovik deliriously, as I slid down him.

“Damn you both!” Ethan pulled abruptly away from my body. “Keep her! I tire of the slut!”

Brovik sat up, pale hair falling into his eyes. “Ethan, she’s overcome by the bonding.”

Ethan towered over us his expression closed and dark. “I should never have brought her to you.”

Brovik collapsed back against the mattress laughing, while Ethan pulled on his clothes, and strode from the room. Minutes later, one of the cars screeched out of the tunnel to the ferry slip.

Brovik shrugged as if he were used to it. “He’ll get over it— in two or three decades perhaps.”

“But...”

“No questions.” He slid into me again. “Conversation isn’t required.”

Brovik wasn’t like any man I’d ever encountered. I had a weakness for danger, and he was pure devastation. Ethan could only aspire to his heights.

He insisted I share with him alone, and when I did, a terrifying vision assaulted my psyche. Mist gathered then parted, and in a dawn-red haze, a woman appeared, dressed in flowing gossamer silk, black hair floating about her, as if she was under water. Brovik was there now, bearded, hair long and flowing, dressed in clothes of a long gone age. She slowly raised a knife high above her head, striking a tremor of deep, dark, primal fear. Then, just as suddenly as the vision appeared, it exploded into a mass of colored dots and was blown away.

Brovik lay on his back panting as I snuggled up to him.

“Who was she? The dark woman?”

He rose up, clutching me by the shoulders. “You saw a woman? What else did you see?”

I evaded his question. “Just a woman.”

“Does Ethan know you can see in the blood?”

“Can’t everyone— every *Immortyl* that is?”

“It’s a rare gift. I’ve known only one other who possessed it.”

“Ethan says they’re hallucinations.”

His eyes veiled. “Have you discussed this with any other *Immortyl*? ”

“No, it seems rather, well, personal.”

“Keep this secret. It is best others don’t know.”

“Why?”

“It could bring you harm.”

I remembered the terror gripping Brovik because of this woman, and sensed wheels turning in his ancient brain. He abruptly rose, pulling on his clothing as I retrieved my own from the floor. His room was a surprisingly spare and tidy place. The furnishings were sparse, the large low bed covered in plain white quilts and sheets, a small chest for clothes, two chairs and a small radio. A telescope and some instruments of navigation sat on a small plain table. Books were arranged on a low shelf, mostly about birds, animals and the sea. No poets for Brovik. No starry-eyed dreamers to borrow from. Brovik was poetry.

He stood by the window, holding his hand out to me. “Come, let me show you something.” I joined him and he put his arm around my shoulders, gesturing out to the beautiful night. The tower was glass on all sides so that the sky was visible for three hundred and sixty degrees. The strange light of the aurora played over his features. His eyes looked far beyond and into the past.

His head tilted slightly back, the straight fair hair falling back from his brow as he spoke, “Our Ethan has reached a crucial time in his existence.

After a hundred years all ties to the mortal past have died away. The survivors gone, the times change; nothing looks or sounds or feels the same. He mourns the children he left behind, the infant sons he hardly knew. They grew into men, grew old, and are now dead and gone. He clings to what has slipped beyond his grasp.” He turned to face me. “It’s all dust you see, and gone, poof, into thin air.” He gestured again to the snow-covered pines, the *fiord* and sea beyond. “This is eternity, Mia. It will continue when even we are dust. Ethan cannot love this earth as we do. He’s doomed to seek the unattainable. He blames me for his sorrows, although when I encountered him he was desperate to leave his world behind. I tried to persuade him not to buy the house, too many ghosts there, but you know how stubborn he is.”

“I live with a shadow.” I lifted his hand to my lips. “Let me stay here.”

“Kurt would enjoy company his own age.”

“What was that comment about following someone to a funeral pyre?”

He smiled, drawing his hand away. “I was trying to get his goat as you say. An Old Norse burial rite—when one of our important people died, his slaves were gathered together. It was asked of them, ‘Who will go with him?’ Usually a slave girl agreed to go. She was sacrificed and buried with him.”

Why was I shocked? “She volunteered? Why?”

“Who can say, perhaps she loved her master so much that she could not bear to be parted from him?”

“Maybe they drugged her?”

He chuckled, picking up a small, carved wooden box from which he removed a golden ring. “Come. See what I have for you.”

He dropped a ring engraved with a pattern of interlocking circles into my open palm. “It’s a symbol of my people, meaning unity,” he said, slipping it onto my finger. It fit perfectly. “All members of my house have them.”

I thought of the sewer rats on the beach, and the markings on them, suddenly the ring's weight felt oppressive. He shut the box and stood, unreadable, mysterious, and serene, reaching out to take my head between his hands. Terrified, I looked up into his eyes. My breath came harder. How many times had I been told to beware him? Yet, I found myself falling under his spell.

His fingers brushed over my face. "Don't be frightened, *Bird of Prey*. Tell me how this game evolved?"

"Ethan got the idea from the Ibsen play he saw me in. It became his life's work."

"We needn't be rivals, Mia."

He massaged my temples with his fingertips. My eyes closed for a half-second, then opened full on his calm blue gaze. I stared at him, open-mouthed, forgetting all the careful training of my senses, completely captivated. The sight, sound, taste, and smell of him, drew me. Wasn't this what Ethan cautioned against? His lips parted, tongue lightly moistening them. His breath warmed my skin. I longed for that mouth all over my body.

His fingers traced the line of my brow bone, down over my nose.

"Understand, I'm the moon and you're the tide, without my favor you cease to be, but if you do as you're told, go smoothly, and don't make waves, my love and favor are yours. There's work for you. After the council forbid us to pursue science, Gaius swore he'd work together with me for this cause, but I suspect greed recently got the better of him. Through Kurt's contacts with the little rats, we've learned that Gaius has abducted many of their number, and many shipments of an unknown nature have been made to the Palazzo. It could be nothing, Gaius is a great collector of art as well as flesh, but if he's my competitor I must know. He's recently made another offer for you. Dirk is coming into his portion, and Gaius wishes to bestow on him the gift he most covets. Your power to see in the blood is an asset to this house. Go with Ethan, as if he intended to negotiate a settlement with them, and then contrive to be alone with Dirk. Use your gift to uncover information. In the end, Ethan will refuse Gaius's offer... "

“Dirk will hurt me. Nothing gets him off like my pain.”

“Don’t fear.” I fell under the spell of maddening stroking of my temples, struggling to retain my will. “Nothing will harm you. You have my promise. I know your deepest desire.” He slashed his wrist, pressing it to my lips. His consciousness poured out, filling me along with his blood. I reached out to catch the rays shining from his face. “See what I will give you...”

Kurt, as I first saw him, in the moonlight on the terrace, the god of love, surrounded in cascades of roses. His hand stretched out and I went to him. He was too real to be mere fantasy. I smelled his blood and heard his heartbeat. I was no longer in the tower room but somewhere on a beach with him, waves rushing as a brilliant, blood-red sun rose before us.

Brovik’s voice insinuated itself around my brain. “My boy is beautiful. Feel him inside you.” Kurt’s smooth fingers and mouth caressed my skin. His hands cupped my breasts. I bore his light weight, his teeth and tongue on my throat as he moved inside me. “Imagine a world, where the two of you would be free.”

I shook and shuddered with pleasure. “Yes-s-s!”

“Do as I say and it will be so. Mia!”

I blinked my eyes. Kurt was gone. I met Brovik’s steady gaze, fully aware of what had just transpired, but not quite sure if it was just my imagination.

He nodded to me. “It’s nearly morning. Ethan will be back soon.”

“I’m afraid...”

“I’ll protect you. Go, do as I say.”

Later, I lay awake as Ethan opened the door to our room. “Still awake? Have you finally learned all you desired, Pandora?”

“I *understand* your need for him, Ethan. Nothing in the world is as powerful as the hold he has over you.”

“And now he has that hold over you.”

“I’m part of you, just like we’re both part of him.”

“Whore! Nothing can ever be the same!”

I dropped my voice to a whisper, “Is that what you really think?”

“Don’t play games. What does he want from us?”

“Nothing...”

He grasped my shoulders. “Liar!” He slammed me against the wall, smacking my head. A jolt of pain traveled from the back of my skull down my spine. Tears came, but I refused to let them fall. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. I rose and squared off, slugging him back. He hissed and knocked me to the ground, placing his foot over my throat. I didn’t dare move. For once I really believed he might kill me, but he lifted his foot away. “I warned you but you fell for him anyway!” He dragged me by the hair to throw me face down onto the bed, forcing my hands behind my back. This couldn’t be happening. I was numbed, not believing he was doing this to me, oddly detached from it all, as if I watched the proceedings from afar. He threw his body over me. I attempted to drag myself forward only to find myself pinned by his greater strength. He laughed. I never hated anyone as much as I hated Ethan at that moment.

He whispered in my ear, “Rape is child’s play compared to what I have in mind for you.”

His mouth closed on my throat and punctured the carotid. I tried to wriggle away, as his arm closed tighter around me. I burned all over. Veins alternately exploded and collapsed as my head threatened to crack open. My thirst grew as my body rushed to stave off death, saliva flowing freely down my chin. Throbbing pain pulsated through my flesh. I begged for mercy as so many of my victims had. My fingernails raked his skin, but he didn’t budge. The mouth that had given pleasure in the past brought only pain.

Consciousness grew misty as I slipped into a shadow realm. His face swam around me in a circle as he crouched beside me, studying. The look of contempt was gone, now he simply observed my ordeal, detached until he dissolved into millions of black specks. “Tell me what he asked of you!”

The dark prince materialized before me, dragging me toward a dark pool in center of a garden. He grabbed my head, pushing it down under. I flailed, drowning.

Suddenly, I was pulled out into the arms of another. “*You’ll never take, what she won’t give, you fool! She’ll die first.*” Brovik’s voice blended with the fair demon’s, thundering through the mist, “Mia, drink! Now! Do you hear me? Drink or you’ll die!”

My mouth was forced open.

I regained consciousness to find Brovik standing over me, my mouth fastened to his bleeding wrist, and Ethan, looking miserable.

A wave of revulsion swept over me. “Monster!”

Brovik chided him, “Who’s the barbarian now? Are you proud of your handiwork?

A strangled sob came from Ethan, “What have I done?” He threw himself protectively over me. “I’ll see you rot in hell, Brovik!”

I pushed Ethan away. “I hate you!”

Ethan clambered to his feet, grabbing Brovik by the shoulders. “You did this!”

“You did this, not me,” Brovik said, extracting himself from Ethan’s grasp.

“You can’t bear for me to have something of my own!”

“She’s no more yours, than you are mine!”

Ethan stared at him dazed. “What did you promise her?”

Brovik stared Ethan down. “She sees visions in the blood, did you know? Imagine what she’s seen inside you?” He turned away and left us all alone.

I gathered my robe around me. “Don’t ever touch me again!”

Ethan stood heaving. “I told you he could bend minds like stalks of wheat, but you couldn’t resist him...”

“Can you?”

“Everything about him is a lie.”

“You’re ridiculous, clinging to your past. Go back to Virginia and haunt your stupid house, you malevolent ghost!”

“You’re a mere child. You know nothing. You will see, Mia. In time, you will see.”

TWELVE

* * * *

Convinced he was no longer the center of my universe, Ethan retreated ever farther into shadow, while Brovik welcomed me into both his arms and bed on a regular basis. It took a great deal of persuasion on Brovik's part to place me there, but Ethan eventually succumbed. Who could resist Brovik? It was folly, and I a mere pawn in the game between them, but I didn't care.

On the final night of our visit, as we three lay bathed in the glow of the aurora one long night, I questioned Brovik about Kurt. He opened a drawer and showed me a picture from an old newspaper clipping, twelve year-old Kurt, whose impossibly large eyes looked even larger.

“Ethan and I had seen this brilliant, young musician’s concert, not imagining one day our paths would cross. Kurt struggled so valiantly to live... I couldn’t turn away.” Ethan scowled as Brovik looked on the clipping fondly. “Such beauty must be cherished and protected.”

“Why don’t you call him home?”

“Put that thought out of your head,” Ethan growled. “I won’t stay under the same roof.”

“He speaks.” Brovik took the clipping and replacing it in the drawer he had taken it from.

Ethan lay back with his eyes closed. “Filling her head with tales of your imaginary Viking exploits is one thing, but spinning romantic fancies about your paramour is another.”

“You always profess to be free of pointless standards of morality.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Has the boy usurped your place? Have I taken away anything of yours because of him?”

Ethan didn’t answer.

“Kurt works hard. He’s not a mere plaything. He’s sharp, loyal, and does what’s asked of him without complaint. And I don’t need to tell you what joy his music brings.”

“I don’t have to listen to this.”

“Get used to the idea, I rely on him absolutely.”

“She’s formed an unhealthy fancy for him.”

“This miserable life should have some consolation,” I muttered.

“Don’t even think of consoling yourself with him,” Ethan snapped.

“If I did, no power on earth could stop me.”

Brovik laughed. “Your Bird of Prey has proven no parrot.”

“You encourage her disobedience.”

“You want so much to be enlightened, but you don’t allow her to think for herself. If she fancies my beautiful boy, what harm is there?”

“I’d kill her first.”

“Your ideas are as archaic as Kalidasa’s. You chose her for her intelligence, but you can’t stand that she has her own ideas. Why are we doing this work if not to free them?”

“I ask myself that question constantly.”

“It is inevitable. The old ones will fall from power. Our children will walk in the sun.”

Rooting through the drawer, Brovik came up with a wide, elaborately decorated, gold bracelet. “Ah, here it is. I knew I still had it. Come Mia, a gift for you. A craftsman in Constantinople fashioned it for me, centuries ago.” He clasped it about my upper arm. The woman it had been made for was somewhat broader of limb and it hung loosely. “We’ll have it cut to fit you.”

Ethan took it. “Absolutely not, this is priceless, an artifact of an ancient age!”

Brovik pooh-poohed him, “It’s nothing, a bauble with one purpose, to compliment a woman’s beauty.”

Ethan examined the beautiful spiral design. “Don’t spoil it. We *must* preserve beauty by all means.”

Brovik took it and clasped it again on my upper arm. “I care nothing for the past, except of a form of entertainment for young listeners. The bloodthirsty berserker legend has its use.”

The bracelet slipped down my arm. I pushed it up. “Don’t disappoint me. You burn and pillage my imagination.”

“We were simply voyagers in search of new lands, not mindless killers that Christian monks and Arab traders painted us to be.”

Ethan sneered. “He’s left out the most interesting part of his legend. He killed his maker with his own hands. Staked her before dawn and cut her throat—but she cursed him that he’d die at a woman’s hand.”

I was flabbergasted. “Your maker was a *woman*?”

“Ethan, I’m surprised at you. You profess to be a man of science, surely you don’t believe in such folderol?”

“The question is, do you?”

All at once Brovik became still. He looked to Ethan, then to me. He started to laugh, softly at first, building to a crescendo. “Is this why you have made

your *Bird of Prey*, to frighten me with the specter of Sanjavani?"

"You've taken no women, unless you count the boy."

"I couldn't leave such a heart to stop beating! Kurt's the best I've *ever* made, and there were a dozen before you! He's contributed more to this house in a decade, than you've done in a century."

This remark wounded Ethan deeply. He rose from the bed. "Do without my contribution then!"

"Go then, maybe Gaius will take you in. See if you fare as well under him."

Ethan turned slowly pale and trembling. "You just have to pound the stake in a little at a time, don't you?"

"Don't be foolish." Brovik laid a gentle hand on Ethan's shoulder. "There's work for you, a chance to show your mettle. It will be lucrative if you succeed."

Ethan threw him off. "What work?"

"Take Mia to the Wolf's palazzo."

"Bringing her here for you to dally with is one thing, but I won't subject her to them!"

"Gaius has made several offers. It's our chance Ethan."

"And you know what Dirk will do to her."

"She's smart enough to handle that buffoon. Why else did you train her?" Ethan didn't answer. Brovik took a long look at him. "I'll speak to Gaius—say you've tired of her, and want to be rid of her. Take her in a week's time, when he invests Dirk with his portion. Mia will maneuver to be alone with him, won't you my dear?"

Ethan glared at me. "What did you bribe her with?"

Blood rushed to my face against my will.

“She’ll do this out of love, which is more than I can say for you.”

Ethan winced. “Is this what you want Mia, to be his pawn?”

“If it can help our cause...”

“Funny, until recently, you found this cause to be hopeless.”

“I’ve seen the light.”

“I’m sure you have. How much Brovik?”

“Ten thousand.”

“For my *property* to be savaged?”

“Fifteen. Demand compensation from Gaius as well.”

“This is dangerous work. Twenty.”

“Very well, build another wing onto your house.”

Ethan smiled, turning to me. “Perhaps Gaius will outbid you. It may be to my advantage to sell her.”

Brovik shook his head. “You bluff badly.”

I was pissed now. “I’m not your property!”

“Oh yes, you are. I’ve invested a lot in you, but rest assured my dear, you’re worth more in the long haul. I’m sure Brovik has more work for us.”

They just looked at one another, so much baggage there, each maneuvering to get his way. I looked at them both, sick and apprehensive, wondering just how much I’d be called upon to do in pursuit of the cause, before I had what *I* wanted most.

THIRTEEN

* * * *

Two weeks later, a boat picked up Ethan from our dock to take us to Capri. Brovik had given me a blood red satin gown for the occasion, and I wore the rubies Ethan had given me our first year together. Ethan, in evening clothes, leaned against the rail, thinking of all the nice things his twenty thousand would buy, no doubt.

Sunset bled over the horizon, scarlet and purple, reflected in the bay's smooth mirror. I looked north. What Kurt was doing? The boat pulled up to Gaius's dock and we were helped ashore, and up a steep stairway, by burly male slaves, Ethan referred to as *dogs*.

Red veins spread over the black marble, Renaissance *palazzo*, like blood-filled capillaries. Well-dressed vampires strolled through verdant gardens, all Gaius's blood.

I asked Ethan how he could keep such an establishment without suspicion.

He shrugged. "Anyone this rich can buy all the anonymity he wants."

Heads turned. I clung to Ethan's arm, ignoring speculative murmurs. What appeared to be a teenaged girl approached, her green eyes complimented by the emeralds she wore. Her nubile curves were outlined in green silk. Shining auburn hair cascaded down her bared back.

Ethan's face warmed. "*Lisette, enchantee*."

A slender white hand reached out for him to kiss. She surprised me by embracing me and kissing my cheeks. "*Quelle charmante!* We wondered when Ethan would share his treasure."

A surprising wave of desire rose up over me as she caressed my cheek. You'd have to be made of stone not to want her.

“Where is Gaius?” Ethan asked.

She tilted her head. “In the gallery. He has some new picture he wants to show you. Go. I’ll take good care of Mia.” She took my arm. “Come meet Guilietta. She’s *terrible, cherie*, I warn you.”

We strolled across the garden arm and arm, Lisette chattering and fussing over my gown and jewelry. I half heard what she was saying. As we took our turn about, murmurs of derision rose.

I took stock of Gaius’s *alphas* and their households. The alphas were all cut from the same cloth, and I didn’t think much of the tailor. Their women flitted about the gardens, gilded butterflies in fine materials of every color, glittering with jewels on their breasts, hair, fingers and ears, laughter tinkling like broken crystal on the wind. Most ranged from pubescence to my mortal age in appearance, a few were little girls, their blithe faces belying the horror underlying this masquerade.

Their masters were mostly on the tall side. Even in times when such height was rare they managed to find the tallest, strongest males to add to the ranks. But in the shadows hovered males with the shape of boys, with eyes that had seen too much. Hatred burned in those glittering orbs, rage at being trapped forever in this state. I knew only Diego’s Arturo, a dark-haired, doe-eyed, teenaged-formed beauty, who served glasses of warmed blood from a silver tray.

Lisette led me up to the terrace where a cool blonde held court with a circle of male admirers. Guilietta was easily the tallest woman there, willowy, with a smooth cornet of silvery blonde held high on a long neck—Grace Kelly with a really bad attitude. Violet eyes fell on me. “Who is this?”

“Ethan’s Mia.”

She gave me the once over, a hard little smile tightening luscious lips. “Not so much to look at, is she?”

I could have raked my nails over that perfect white face, but diplomacy was the word, so I bit my tongue. But oh, if I ever get the chance...

Lisette laughed. “Our lord differs with your opinion.”

The men laughed, but Giulietta was nonplused. “After three hundred years in his favor, she’s no threat to me. Lisette flatters herself because she’s managed to keep her head longer than the rest.”

“I think she’s delicious.” Lisette surprised me by wrapping her arms around me and kissing me on the mouth as the men gawked.

Gaius came up the steps, just as Lisette drew away, leaving me breathless. The alphas scattered, as their lord bent to kiss my hand. “My Little Pomegranate Blossom. Giulietta? Where are your manners? Kiss your new sister.”

“This American bitch brings nothing but trouble! Mark my words.” She glided away, midnight blue skirts rustling behind.

Gaius watched her departure, chuckling. “So passionate. I never know whether she’ll pull a dagger.” He drew Lisette to him. “You aren’t the jealous type, are you Kitten?” Gaius’s hands caressed her bare shoulders. “You two must become better acquainted. Our amusements are so much more exquisite. Kitten, go tell Dirk I wish to speak with him.”

She gave me a come-hither look as she slipped away. Gaius offered his arm, leading me to a vantage point overlooking the bay. “Tiberius lived on this island once. Far from the oppressive elements of Rome— free to seek his pleasures.”

The emperor’s pleasures included sexually abusing kids. He called them his “minnows”, and when he tired of them he’d throw them off the cliff behind his palace.

Gaius turned my right hand palm up, tracing veins in my wrist with his fingers. “The same blood made us Mia; your mortal clan goes back to Etruscan times. Dirk has served me well. To avoid trouble with Ethan, I sent him away, but he did as I bid, on the promise I would obtain you for him. However, you won’t be merely an ornament for his bedchamber. I have particular need of your skills.”

Two of the Alphas he'd dismissed had been joined by a third and they glared silently at us across the terrace. "Your Alphas seem unimpressed."

He smiled slowly, drawing my hand up to his lips and kissing the upturned palm. "They underestimate you. In my hands you can be a Messalina. But don't underestimate Dirk. He *is* a brute, but his savagery will survive the coming trials, with enough left over to make you behave. There will be bloodshed in years to come." He looked grimly out to the bay. "Time is catching up with us. The mortal world grows close to unraveling our mystery. Brovik believes the downfall of the ancients is inevitable. The *Ragnorak*, twilight of the Gods, he calls it."

"That's too poetic for Brovik. It's much more in Ethan's line."

"There's a valued place for you in my house. I won't let Dirk do you harm — aside from his peccadilloes. He'll cause pain, but nothing you won't survive. It means too much to him to possess you."

On cue, Dirk lurched up the stairs, in impeccable eveningwear, his sandy hair slicked back, sporting a white orchid in his lapel. Evidently, he'd spent some time in exile polishing. On his finger glittered a ring shaped as the she-wolf and twins, set with diamonds, very different than the plain gold Brovik had given. Dirk bowed and kissed my hand. I recoiled. "Good evening Mia, how lovely you look."

Gaius laughed out loud. "You won't win her that way. Her value is she has no delusions about men's flatteries. It will serve you better to curse her. She hates you, poor fool. If you weren't so cruel yourself I'd worry. How you'll torment each other." Gaius laughed again. "She'll take your head someday. I'll put money on it."

Dirk scowled, more like himself. "You find this amusing?"

"When you've lived as long as I, you'll welcome any novelty."

"I'll *make* her love me."

Gaius laughed again. “Now, there’s another wager I’ll take. Don’t be a fool. Ask Mia about the durability of true love.”

“She has no choice.” Dirk liked that idea. “No choice at all. Oh, that really irks her to hear that. I’ll remind her every night.”

“Enough. I wanted you both to hear this. I’m making you second, to fill the place left when Enrico was killed.”

Dirk was delighted. “The others will hate it!”

“I can depend on your loyalty. The others I’m not so certain of. But don’t think because I’m giving her to you that she won’t be expected to work. I have plans for her and want no interference from you. Understood?”

“Fine.”

“Look at me! I know your lusts, Dirk. She’s not your victim and I won’t have her treated so. So help me, I’ll take her from you.”

“Understood.”

“There Pomegranate Blossom, you have my promise.” Boy, if he knew what I thought of his promises. Gaius kissed me on the cheeks. “I must go meet with Ethan. Dirk, entertain her— show her the labyrinth.”

As soon as Gaius left, Dirk jerked me to him, chortling. “Things will be very different now. It must really irk you that pretty Ethan put you aside, but with me you’ll be better off.”

“You really get off on me hating you.”

“It makes it more interesting. Let’s find a little privacy.”

He dragged me, a kid with a new toy, toward the gardens where a bronze Eros perched over a magnificent marble fountain. His slender, winged form recalled Kurt’s, while Dirk’s simian bulk prompted nothing but revulsion. Psyche never labored as hard as me for Love.

I grimaced. “You’re as happy as a pig in shit, as we say, but it’s not a done deal. Ethan could change his mind.”

“The Northman doesn’t want you in the way. You need a man, not another man’s boy.” He pulled me into a maze of shrubs. “This is much better.” He lowered my bodice, trailing his finger over my breasts. “You know you want it.”

I stared him down. “Not particularly, but if the compensation is worth it I can tolerate it.”

“Arrogant slut.” He wrapped one arm around my waist, his free hand groping me. His tongue forced its way into my mouth, a wet, slippery eel. I pulled back and scratched his face, knowing full well this is what he liked. He grabbed me by the shoulders. I struggled to free myself. “That’s right, put up a fight,” he panted, licking a slimy path down my throat.

I pushed his head away, gasping. “Can’t you wait until they settle terms?”

He whined, “I’ve waited twelve years!”

My voice dropped low in my chest, “It’ll be so much better when we’re in our own bed.”

He moaned aloud and pushed me down on my knees, unzipping his trousers, “Suck me off!”

I pushed, knocking him backwards into the hedge, and took off running through the maze. I had to string him along for a while longer. If I gave in too easily, he’d be suspicious. The long gown tripped me up and the corset I wore kept me from getting a decent breath. I came up on a dead end, panting against the wall of a shed, until he found me.

“I’m tired of games.” He pulled me into the small stone building, opening a trapdoor in the floor and carried me down, shutting the trapdoor and locking it from inside. I broke away and ran into a storeroom filled with crates, adjacent to the stairs. Dirk cornered me and caught me by the shoulders, sinking his teeth into my neck, draining me until I was weak. “You’re not

going anywhere yet.” He grabbed a length of chain that he wrapped around my wrists, fastening them to a hook hanging from the wall so my feet barely brushed the ground. He seized my chin, forcing me to look at him. His face was impassive, blank and cold as he slid the zipper of my gown down my back, letting it drop to the floor. He drew a thin bladed knife from his coat, trailing the point over my throat, slicing the skin.

“Dirk, please.”

He licked my blood from the blade. “The Northman has ways of bending minds, Gaius says. Are you a spy?” He grabbed my hair, bending my neck painfully to look up at him. “Answer me!”

“No!”

He bent over my throat again, drawing very hard on the wound, until I was gasping with searing pain. “You’re a locked door! Damn you!” Cold darkness swirled around as he took hold of my hips. As loathsome experiences go, it was the worst.

I was torn, bruised, and bleeding all over when that animal finished. Finally, he gave me his wrist. “Go on, drink. I’ll take you to Gaius. We’ll have time enough to work on you.”

As soon as his blood hit my system, vision locked in: hospital gurneys and small Immortyls chained down, their blood siphoned out by tubes and pieces of their flesh cut away by scalpels, screaming in agony as Dirk and Gaius watched. The vision flickered for only a moment, replaced by a glowing skull with yellowish eyes.

He unchained me. “Get dressed.” I reached out, scratching a huge gash on his face. He shoved me against the wall. “You’ll pay for that.”

I struggled with my dress. He watched, with a satisfied smirk on his face. He grabbed my arm and dragged me along a corridor to a stone staircase, pulling me up the steps and through a doorway concealed by tapestries. Torches illuminated archaic instruments of torture and hospital gurneys. The room I’d seen in the blood was very real.

“Gaius will bring you later for some fun.” He pressed a switch concealed in a panel on the opposite wall. It slid aside to reveal a large, luxurious apartment with huge windows overlooking the bay. Sitting at a small round table were Ethan, Gaius and his women playing cards. The women laughed as Ethan told an anecdote in Italian. Dirk dragged me in front of Gaius. Ethan looked at my disheveled appearance and his eyes went cold.
“Sniveling dog, the terms aren’t even decided!”

Gaius was stone-faced. “Dirk, what has transpired?”

“I made sure she wasn’t a spy.”

Ethan jumped to his feet, grabbing Dirk by the lapels. “You bled her? Who gave you permission?”

Dirk’s yellow eyes narrowed as he spat in Ethan’s face, “Remove your hands you strutting peacock, or I’ll cut your throat.”

“Enough!” Gaius growled.

Ethan released Dirk. “He has no right!”

Dirk smirked. “It’s not like it’s the first time.”

“Silence!” Gaius thundered, and I do mean that, the room shook. Dirk paled and backed off, slinking into a corner.

Ethan sat me down, but the coward couldn’t look me in the eye as he examined the marks and bruises Dirk had left. “Animal, I wouldn’t give her to you for any price!”

Gaius slugged Dirk. “You’ve ruined any chance you may have had—and now I owe him damages! Stupid beast! Ethan, will accept you the painting as compensation, with my deepest apologies?”

“I’d like his head better.”

“That would be a matter for the council. We don’t need to involve them, do we?”

Lisette brought warm water and gently washed blood from my skin. My wounds burned as if they had been cauterized.

Guilietta stared hard at me. “I knew she’d cause problems.”

Gaius stared her down. “No one asked your opinion.”

“You put too much trust in that buffoon over there, so your alphas are turning. Ethan is right. Take his head!”

The Wolf’s eyes went cold. “You’re dismissed.”

Guilietta glided past. “Mark me, it won’t end here.”

Gaius turned to Ethan. “Perhaps it’s best you go now.”

Twenty minutes later, Gaius’s boat sped back over the bay to our villa with Ethan cradling his crated painting and me huddled on the deck in a robe belonging to Lisette. Pleased with the turn of events, he hummed a little tune, mentally tallying his take while I sat utterly wretched and spent by the night’s events.

“Cheer up, Madam. You’ll never be troubled by that swine again.”

“If only I could say the same for you.”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed. “What exactly did Brovik promise you?”

Kurt’s face flickered before me, but I was too drained to feel desire, only a deep longing, sadness.

“You went above and beyond for our glorious cause, my dear.”

“Don’t you ever know when to shut the fuck up?”

“You were so gung ho on this. You didn’t agree to be manhandled just to make Brovik happy. We’ll just have to wait and see if he comes through with the goods.”

Brovik lost no time in calling on us, Philip in tow. He was very pleased with the outcome of the venture and brought me a small golden falcon as a gift.

“Egyptian. Very old,” Ethan said, appraising it. “Horus.”

“Had it for centuries—our Bird of Prey should have it. You’re returning to America. I have more work for you there. Philip has your payment in that briefcase; count it if you don’t trust me. Mia, join me on the terrace? I wish to enjoy the view.”

The night was cool with the crisp, clean smell of ripening grapes. Now and then the moon would break through the clouds and bleach Brovik’s pale hair to silver. His untroubled demeanor gave no clues to his thoughts.

“You’ve done well, my dear, very well indeed,” he said, finally. “Tell me exactly what you learned in the Wolf’s house.”

I told him everything, down to the last bruise. He took me into his arms and held me tightly. “Dear child, it grieves me that you endured this. Your courage puts us all to shame. This is valuable information.”

“What about the little rats? He’ll go on hurting them.”

“Unfortunately, that is their lot. Kurt will warn them to avoid the Wolf’s dominions.”

Since Brovik had mentioned Kurt it seemed like a good time to broach the subject of my reward. “How is he?”

Brovik smiled fondly. “Well.” He slipped a small book of Shelly’s poems into my hand. “He asked me to give you this, a first edition he found in a shop in London.”

An envelope protruded from the book. I took the envelope out of the book and ran the smooth, heavy paper through my fingers. Closing my eyes, I conjured his face. “I’ve done my part, Brovik. You said you’d arrange things.”

I opened my eyes. Brovik tilted my chin up, serene smile flowing over his face. It was like Ethan said. He just reached inside and plucked the soul from me.

“Dear child, did you think I meant right now? There’s far too much to be done first. I need you at Ethan’s side. The two of you work so well together. Ethan’s great talent is courting investors and politicians. You’ll be instrumental in this work.”

The desperate butterfly panicked as the net dropped down on her yet again.
“How long, Brovik?”

“When we finish this work, you’ll be free to go to Kurt.”

“When— in thirty years?”

“This work is more important than your lust.”

I was angry now. I snapped the book shut. “So, I have no choice, but to be Ethan’s slave?”

Brovik smiled again. “Thirty years is a mere blink of an eye to us.”

“It’s a lifetime to me. I’ll kill myself, I swear, if I have to endure another night with Ethan!”

He took me by the shoulders. “You will go back to America with him, and go on as you are until I have no more need of your service!” An owl hooted overhead. Brovik looked up, spooked. The slightest of tremors passed through him. He softened his tone. “You’re still very young. You and Kurt have centuries ahead of you. Ethan isn’t the harshest master you could endure. Dirk must have taught you that.”

“It’s easy for you to say!”

“To lead an Immortyl house is fraught with danger and sorrow as well.” He took my head into his hands, fixing his eyes on mine. “In time what you desire will be yours. *Stay with Ethan.*”

I shook my head adamantly, looking away from his strange hypnotic stare.
“I won’t cooperate anymore!”

I broke away, running back into the house, wanting to go upstairs and lock myself in. I tore through the drawing room. Ethan and Philip looked up.

“What on earth did he say to make her behave so?” Ethan asked.

Philip blocked my path. “Hold on, little one. Has the old one upset you?”

“Let me go! I’m sick of all of you!” I jabbed my heel into Philip’s foot and ran upstairs to my room, slamming the door.

I threw myself face down on the bed, head throbbing. Tears ran down my face. I still held Kurt’s letter clutched in my hand. To my surprise Ethan came in from the balcony. He must have climbed the arbor. I hid the letter, but he saw it and snatched it away, holding it above my head.

“What’s this? A love letter? Let’s see, from whom?”

I looked up at him and snapped, “Go on, say something disgusting, it’s the only thing you know how to do.”

Ethan took it all in good humor. He just enjoyed my pain too much. “How long has this little correspondence been going on?”

“Ever since Philip first came to see us!”

Ethan unfolded the sheets and smoothed them out to read. “So that’s the reason for all those packages, to hide his treachery?”

“Stop being so dramatic! Give it back to me!” I reached out and tried to take it.

Ethan snatched it away again. “Does Brovik know about these letters?” A malicious grin split Ethan’s face. “You’ve been played for a fool, my dear.” He began to laugh. “Now I know what he promised you! Let’s read what tender phrases Cupid concocted to woo you. Oh my, this is dull. No wonder you’re in tears. Oh, this is promising, ‘How lovely you looked the last time

I saw you with the wind in your hair and the moonlight in your eyes... but how sad, so unhappy to be chained to that monster.' Don't you see? Brovik put him up to it. The boy turned those big, blue eyes on and you turned to mush covered in molasses. Do you really believe that effeminate creature cares for you?"

"He's not effeminate! He's— something beyond your understanding!"

Ethan grabbed my arm and pulled me to him. "He's a killer, Mia, just like the rest of us. Haven't I taught you anything? Stupid, does he put you in mind of that boy you fell in love with when you were fifteen? Wake up my dear, he's devoted to only one love, you have the wrong set of equipment."

"No. That would be *you*."

Ethan hauled off and slapped me. "I'm putting a stop to this now."

He stalked out of the room and went downstairs to confront Brovik. I was momentarily paralyzed. What if all Ethan said was true? I'd been misled once already. Maybe it *all* was a ploy, and the things Kurt had said to me for years were just lies. I had to find out. I followed Ethan downstairs, where Philip was stirring the fire, and Brovik leafing through a pile of papers Ethan had prepared, our expenses for the trip home.

Ethan waved the letter in Brovik's face. "So. You promised her the boy. You put him up to writing her love letters."

Brovik was nonplussed and pushed Ethan's hand away as if shooing a fly. "I only encouraged him. The words and the sentiments are his own."

"You manipulated her and deceived me."

Brovik's liquid smile flowed once more. "It has worked to our advantage."

"Well, now that this is out in the open, we can end this little charade." Ethan turned to Philip. "You had a part, too."

Philip's face was troubled. "The child was lonely. I thought friendship with one her own age would be good for her. I never meant harm."

I appealed to Philip. “Tell me the truth. Was all this all a ploy?”

“Not on my part. I believe Kurt had no part, either.”

“The boy had no part,” Brovik said, not looking up from the figures on the paper. “He genuinely cares for her.”

Ethan was furious. “Isn’t this all so touching? The fact remains that she’s mine and I have no intention of giving her up. She just made me a cool fifty thousand, between my compensation and the painting.”

“It’s my desire she remain with you,” Brovik replied. “I discussed this with her outside.”

Philip was perturbed. “Do you even love the girl, Ethan?”

Ethan’s face gave no clue as he replied to Philip’s question, “Ask Brovik, he knows the answer.”

Brovik looked bored. “This work is important to us all. You two will work out your difficulties. Philip and I have business in Rome. I can’t stay here and argue over hurt feelings.”

“You wreak your havoc and move on, just to get what you want.”

“Remember that Ethan and you’ll have an easier time of it. I didn’t survive a thousand years by worrying about sensibility. I get results anyway I can. We have bigger things to worry about than Mia fancying Kurt.”

I trembled from head to foot with anger. “You used me. You’re as bad as Gaius!”

Brovik grew horrifyingly still. “I won’t have either of you getting in the way of our progress. I don’t care if you despise each other. You’ll do as you are ordered. Philip, let’s go.” He abruptly left the room.

Philip kissed my cheek and whispered into my ear. “*Courage*, little one—the boy is true.”

I pulled away from him. “You told me never to trust anyone. I guess you were right.”

“Philip, come,” Brovik called from the door.

Philip shook his head, taking one last look at us before he left with Brovik.
“Ruthven, old chap, we’ve made a sad mess of things.”

Ethan looked as if I were an insect he scraped off of the sole of his shoe.
“Here I thought it was Brovik, but all along he was pandering his paramour to you.”

“Well, that should work for you. Brovik’s bed is a bit crowded. Go on, hit me again, leave bruises. They will fade. I found that out with Dirk.”

“You endured that animal because Brovik promised you an opportunity to rut with Kurt?”

“No, to be free of you and all your misery!”

“Misery, madam? I’ve endured your haranguing for over a decade. Perhaps, I long to be free of you!”

“Go on, throw me out, and lose the best investment you ever made.”

Ethan grabbed my throat. “Don’t tempt me. I can always make a new and improved version of you. Brovik could care less as long as she does as she’s told. What would become of you then? Maybe little Amor would spirit you away, or maybe he’d just let you lie there until the sun rots the flesh from your bones. You are *nothing* without me. I took you from that wretched theatre and made you a goddess.”

“I never asked to be a goddess. I only wanted you to love me. You should have left me to die. Hell, couldn’t be any worse than this!”

He released me and looked on in grim satisfaction. “Well, well, all grown up at last. Welcome to eternal perdition my dear, with all its empty promises and unending torment. Now you know...”

Mia trailed off into silence. Joe observed her pained expression, and thought it best to call it quits. “That’s enough. I still have to go play chess with Kurt.”

She nodded, saying nothing more, still and depressed.

“All right?”

“Just missing him.”

“I understand. Good night.”

“Good night.”

He took a last inquiring look, but she didn’t move a muscle. What had gotten into her lately?

Joe carried the beautifully carved chess set his father had left him into the other cell. Kurt delighted in the carving of the onyx pieces as Joe unpacked them, turning the slightly transparent stone in his slender fingers.

“Exquisite...”

“Been in my family for generations— played a lot when I was a kid.”

“My father taught me when I was very young. We played backstage during my concert tours in the early thirties.”

Weird. Kurt was older than Joe’s father was when he died, yet he looked so young and smooth. That image made Joe uncomfortable.

Kurt chuckled. “Doctor, you needn’t be so tense. I *only* want a game of chess.”

“Sorry?”

“Set up the board. You move first.”

Joe made his first tentative move. Kurt astonished him by beating him in four. They played again and again. Each time Kurt swiftly took him down.

“You’re murdering me.”

Kurt sat, arms folded across his chest, face relaxed. “Take time to consider your moves.”

“You just look where I move and pounce.”

“I can see exactly what you’re doing. You make it much too easy. See the board in your mind. Anticipate my next move. Set up again.”

This time Joe was able to hold him off awhile. Kurt was very pleased. “You see— you can do it when you think.” Kurt looked over the board before he moved. “You talked with Mia earlier?”

“She’s really upset about something.”

Kurt slid his bishop forward. “You shouldn’t have advanced that knight. Check.”

Joe made a defensive move, but Kurt boxed him in. “Checkmate. Mia knows every ploy man has used on woman. To maintain her trust you must be completely honest.”

“Do you trust me?”

Kurt’s face curved into a smile. “You haven’t tried to manipulate me yet.”

“You scare the shit out of me.”

Kurt chuckled, looking the most human in aspect Joe had seen. Was it just because usually Kurt sat in near darkness, cast in long shadows, eyes glittering in his pale face like two blue Christmas lights?

Joe finally got an inkling of just what attracted Mia to him. Kurt was calm, logical and even serene in manner.

The vampire sank into the chair opposite, thick lashes drooping over his intense eyes. “You’ve been very decent to us.”

The vampire's close proximity and sexual ambiguity made Joe very uneasy. Joe found himself blushing, not able to meet Kurt's gaze as he packed up the pieces. "It's just the right thing to do. By the way, Lee Brooks is coming at the end of the month. Lydia believes she'll want to speak with you then."

"Without you we have no lifeline between us. The only thing we have to bargain with is information. Can we play again sometime soon?"

"Sure, I'll leave the board here. Goodnight..." Joe hesitated a moment.

Kurt's eyebrows rose slightly. "Doctor?"

"I saw rune symbols while Mia was reading your first letter."

The vampire sighed. "I devised this system of communication just in case we were ever separated." Kurt's troubled gaze met Joe's full on. "One must always anticipate the opponent's next move."

Joe understood. They wouldn't sacrifice their most valuable piece until they were assured of winning. Little Kurt was very shrewd; he had coached Mia all the way.

FOURTEEN

* * * *

Joe lay in Jean's bed, tossing and turning. Stress and fatigue had rendered him impotent. He lay empty and aching, staring at the pattern of swirls in the plaster ceiling of the bedroom. Jean was fast asleep beside him, her breathing even. Finally, his swollen eyes grew heavier and heavier, until he couldn't pry them open.

He awoke with a start. A heartbeat echoed in the room, fast like a kid's. A light wind blew through the open window. Seductive musky scent filled the air, the pheromone. He bolted upright, horrified. *Mia?* How on earth did she escape and find him here? She appeared at the window, suspended on a current of air, a fallen angel, the moon back-lighting the diaphanous white robe she wore, revealing the lush curves of her body. Dark hair blew away from her face by the warm breeze. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief. It was like some horror flick. Could he really hear music? Chopin maybe, played in a maddening throbbing rhythm. Where was Jean? Why did she leave him in the middle of the night?

“*Youssef, come away...*”

She beckoned to him. He rose from the bed, the maddening scent urging him forward. She held out her arms, murmuring words of love. He embraced her and looked down into her eyes to see his own minute image mirrored *ad infinitum* in the glittering shards. He screamed.

Someone had him by the shoulder, shaking him. “Joe, wake up, for God’s sake, you’re all in a sweat, are you all right?”

His eyes opened on Jean, already dressed for work. Shit, he should have gone home hours ago. Another lie he’d have to tell Rima. The pounding started up in his head. He gathered Jean to him and clung tightly.

“I had a nightmare.”

Her body stiffened. She pulled away. “I’m not sure I want to hear. You called out Mia’s name in your sleep. It’s not the first time you’ve done it. I can’t take this anymore. I know you’ll never leave your wife. I came to grips with that a long time ago, but this project has changed you. I don’t know you anymore. Look at you—you’re a mess. They’re sucking the life out of you, even if they never touched a drop. There’s coffee in the kitchen. Just put your key on the table when you go.”

“What?”

“Goodbye, Joe, I’m going to work now. I’ll see you there.”

Later, Joe threw himself down on the chair in his office, head pounding. He glanced at his watch. He had a meeting with Lydia in a few minutes. He’d give himself a shot for the migraine first. His eyes lighted on the drawing of a vampire child Mia had given him. It was exquisitely detailed, if somber.

He reached into the desk and got out the syringe, reeling from all that had transpired. Tearing open the alcohol wipe, he swabbed his arm. Jean was gone. There was nowhere to retreat to now. He stuck the needle into the vial, filling it with the proper dosage, pushing the air out. A drop of clear liquid glistened on the tip. Cursing, he jabbed his arm, welcoming the keen sudden pain, hoping it would bring him to his senses.

He looked at the pictures of his wife and children before him on the desk, tears jabbing his eyes. He lowered his pounding head to the desk, nothing seemed right anymore. For the first time he questioned all that he’d ever done, his place in the world. All of his life he’d worked toward this, some discovery that would bring him world acclaim. Was it all worth it in the end? So what if mankind could live forever? Did they deserve it? So far the track record wasn’t great.

He made his weary way to Lydia’s office. The shot had taken the edge of the migraine, but it didn’t make her insistent grilling any easier.

“This Gaius was Brovik’s rival— maybe he’s the one who is after them. In any case, these guys are seriously bad...”

Lydia frowned as she doodled on a tablet. “Lee is adding more security inside and outside the building. They’re safe down here.”

“Damn it, Lydia! It’s *never* going to be safe for them. Or us, for that matter.”

“Did Kurt tell you anything else? About the discs or his computer?”

That was it. He’d had enough. “My job is to study them, not to spy on them!” Joe stood and stalked out, slamming the door behind him.

When Joe reached Mia’s cell he found her strangely despondent again, sitting on the bed with her knees hugged up to her chest. “What’s wrong?”

“Get us the hell out of here.”

“Lee Brooks will be here in a week. When she comes, I’ll convince her.”

She laughed bitterly. “Do the words, when hell freezes over, have any meaning for you?”

He stared at her for a long time. She was too still, too deadpan. “Something has been eating the shit out of you.”

“Last week they went in and took inventory of the female plumbing. I was awake the whole time. They were afraid to use any drugs. The butcher who did it patted me on the fanny afterward, and told me I’d be better in no time. I put a lock on his balls, and he promptly apologized for the little familiarity — can’t seem to behave myself.” Suddenly she looked very weary. “They took eggs.”

Joe sat next to her. “This is why you’re so upset?”

She snarled at him, “If they jerked you off without your permission how would you feel?”

“I see your point.”

“What will they do with them?”

“Check for viability and mutation, I suppose.”

“They won’t try to clone me or something?”

“They can’t do that yet, besides cloning humans is an ethical minefield.”

“But I’m not human!”

“You’re a person. You have rights.”

“I’m entitled to rights?”

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “Snap out of it Mia!” She looked up surprised. “We won’t get anywhere this way.”

“They all think I’m a monster!”

“You feed on human beings. How else can they see you, from a purely biological point of view?”

She went to sit down in front of the mirror, staring. “I’m just a freak of nature, something to be poked and prodded and experimented upon...”

“No Mia. You’re much more to me than that.”

She peered off somewhere in the distance. “Ethan taught me humanity was an unending banquet, to be devoured and cast aside, but I can’t see you that way. You burn— a star in the void.” Mia suddenly turned, looking on him with troubled eyes. “What if I told you, my one and only wish is to be human again, not necessarily mortal, but human?”

“You have a selfless reason to be here. No one would risk everything to do this if they didn’t. Not many human beings have your courage, or Kurt’s. Lee Brooks is coming here in less than seven days. I need to get finished with this profile before she gets here. I’m under the gun here, and *someone* out there is hunting you. I really want to help, Mia. I swear to you, I’m not backing down. You and Kurt deserve better treatment.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been so snappish. You’re the only one who’s stood up for us.”

“As long as you remain so in a figurative sense, I can deal.”

A small smile curled her mouth. “Those days are behind me forever—strictly bottled blood. I suppose you should know everything—but until Kurt and I are together, we won’t give them any hard data.”

“I understand. Tell me everything that’s happened up until this point.”

“For many years Brovik made no real headway. Ethan and I went back to relative seclusion in Virginia, but by the eighties, he’d made enough progress to send us to New York to woo drug companies with possibilities for treating immune disorders, like AIDS. Of course, all was still theoretical at this point, but, Ethan, with my assistance turned them on, and the money started to flow. He got a nice percentage of everything we raised and of course, now that he was *really* rich he started shopping for a new toy…

This wasn’t the New York I remembered. I’d seen movies and television, so I knew it wouldn’t be the same as in the fifties but nothing prepared me for the shock of seeing it thirty-six years after I’d left it a newborn vampire. It was filthy. The crumbling subway stations smelled of human waste. The streets were home to a host of lost humanity. Glittering glass boxes and granite walled fortresses entombed a corporate Netherworld, of dark suited men and women, who’d arise nightly from coffin-like cubicles. It was like a city of vampires, from the pale and elegant creatures dressed in black in Soho galleries, to the beautiful wraiths stalking runways.

December the twenty-fifth, nineteen-eighty six, was as usual marked by silence. The room in which I sat pondering my existence was a darkened, damask boudoir in Ethan’s Victorian townhouse. He moved around his own room across the hall. Nights went by without a single word. I crossed to the window, pulling back the drape. Just past sunset, workers were waiting for busses or running to subways. Horns blared and auto exhaust worked its way into the house, bringing along a whiff of charcoal.

The first snowfall had come early. By the time I awakened, the street below my window was blanketed in white. I placed my hands flat against the windowpane to feel the cold. Placing my lips up to the glass I left a frosty kiss etched there.

He opened his door and crossed the hall to mine. There was a soft knock. I sighed, and then crossed the room to admit him. He hadn't sought me out in a while.

After it was done, he left me without so much as a thank you, and went out. I watched as he left, wondering how it would be to never touch the satin texture of his skin again, to feel the hardness of his muscle against me, or bury my nose in the perfumed darkness of his hair.

Female scent mingled with Chanel Number Five clung to Ethan's clothes when he returned mornings. He said he was fucking some attorney, who, he took great pleasure in informing me, was like a super model in a magazine, beautiful *and* brilliant. He'd retained her firm's services to handle the acquisition of some biotech companies for Brovik.

I whispered under my breath as the door closed, "Maybe tonight I'll actually leave you."

I rose from the bed and went to the bathroom, turning on the hot water full blast to let the room steam up before I went in. I poured in some bath oil. The tiny room filled with the aroma of jasmine. I slipped into the tub imagining myself in the garden in Virginia, lying on the grass on a summer's night long ago staring at the stars.

I picked up the old fashioned straight razor I'd taken from Ethan's bathroom, running its cold edge against my wrist to watch the blood well up. I ran my tongue over and tasted the salt-iron flavor. The wound immediately clotted. It would take a much larger cut to kill me. I touched the sharp edge to my throat and closed my eyes. There was his face. I pressed the edge of the blade harder against my carotid artery. It would make a big spray, all over the pristine white marble and he'd be so furious. I pressed it harder, breaking out in a sweat. Couldn't do it. *Chicken shit.* Still,

I wanted to wound him in some way. I lay in the water for an hour trying to think of something.

As steam evaporated from the mirror, my face appeared, engulfed in masses of dark hair. I cocked my head to the side and held out a long lock. It was almost as hard as cutting my throat, but this would annoy him about as much as finding the bathroom covered in my blood. I took a deep breath, and then began hacking with the razor. My boyish reflection, sans make-up and spiky hair pleased me immensely.

What to do to amuse myself? I'd tired of television, even with all the cable channels, and the only books in the place I hadn't already read were Ethan's tomes. What could be more fascinating than the snow itself, each unique flake a study of hexagonal perfection? I wanted to catch them and feel them on my face.

The grandfather's clock in the hall chimed eight. I dressed in the jeans and leather jacket I'd bought from a catalogue with Ethan's credit card. At the last moment, I spied my art nouveau butterfly pendant on the dressing table and picked it up, twirling it in my fingers. It was the first and prettiest thing Ethan ever gave me. I couldn't resist putting it on.

As I descended the stairs, the door opened and Ethan came in. He wasn't alone. I caught the scent, female Immortyl with a hint of Chanel Number Five. He'd gone and done it!

Her huge, amber eyes were shocked when she saw me. Not as shocked as I was. She stood at least six two, with strong, broad shoulders under her camel coat. Her sculpted face, with cheekbones Nefertiti would envy, was surrounded by masses of deep copper curls, but her skin wasn't like any Immortyl that I'd yet seen, not palest white or even faintly gold, but a warm gold-brown.

She spoke in a velvety, husky voice, "You'd better say this is your little sister, Ethan."

I almost felt sorry for her. She looked so bewildered by it all, but this was still my territory and I wasn't giving up without a fight. "Who the fuck are

you?”

She didn’t bat an eye. “Leisha Brookings.”

I knew that name. “The lawyer? He has more balls than I give him credit for.”

Ethan set down an expensive set of imported luggage. “Leisha will live with us from now on, Mia.”

I had to lob a dart his way. “I’m surprised. What will your darling Brovik say?”

Her eyebrows went up. “Who?”

“Let’s just say he’s the prince of darkness, and Ethan’s his princess.”

He twisted my arm. “Shut up!”

I pulled away. “Have you taken leave of your senses? Does she know what you are?”

Leisha’s amber eyes perked up. “What’s she talking about?”

Was I a fool? But oh, it felt so good. I turned to her. “Ethan has some very colorful skeletons in the family closet. Did he tell you how old he is, or where he comes from?”

“Go to your room, Mia,” he rumbled low in his chest. “We’ll talk later.”

“Actually, I’m going out.” I grabbed my gloves from the sideboard and shoving them in my pocket.

Leisha cut me off at the door. “He’s told me nothing. You’d better, because he won’t.”

Outrage worked in her face, not one shred of the worship I’d felt for him. Now I saw the state of things. I stared at Ethan in disbelief. “Did she choose?”

He couldn't answer. Leisha's eyes flared again. She grabbed my shoulders and began to shake. I winced. She was *really* strong. "I didn't ask for this! Did you?"

Disgusted, I broke free. I wasn't quite sure I liked her. She was hard, brusque and grim, and I didn't have to, in view of things.

"Oh, come now Leisha, you weren't entirely unwilling," Ethan sneered, taking her in his arms. Surprisingly, she didn't protest—animal lust, nothing more. "What do you think of your new sister, Mia? Amazing, yes? I told you I could improve on the prototype. This one isn't bothered by scruples—pure unadulterated avarice—with a law degree from Harvard to boot."

I took in her magnificence. *Ouch.* "You'll never keep this one on a leash."

"What the fuck are you two talking about!"

I didn't like her after all. Strong, yes, smart, obviously, but really *pushy*. Woe to anyone standing in her way. She *was* admirable, but likable? Hell no. The imp dancing in my head tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop her. "Tell her about life down on the ol' plantation Ethan, circa eighteen sixty. There's way too much historical baggage here. I'll pity you when she's finished."

He grabbed me by the throat, throwing me against the wall. My head cracked, opening a gash. Blood trickled down my face. I touched the wound and momentarily dazed collapsed to my knees.

Leisha gasped. "Ethan, stop! You'll kill her! She's a just a kid, for crissakes!"

"It'll take a hell of a lot more to kill this bitch. You want freedom, Mia? Push me enough and you just might get it."

Leisha convulsed at the sight of me licking my own blood from my hand, covering her face in horror at her own reaction.

I struggled to my feet. “I’ve killed and whored for you for thirty-five years you bastard!”

His eyes narrowed into cold, blue little slits. “Go then, I release you from all bonds, but take only what is on your back.”

Leisha held out her hand. “We’ll go together. Please Mia, don’t leave me with this monster.”

Her long golden-brown hand clasped mine. I looked up to the amber eyes, desperation, but no empathy. Leisha would help no one but herself.

Ethan gave her a staggering blow. She crumpled to the floor, gasping in pain.

“Don’t you understand?” I said. “We’re his slaves you poor fool, neither of us has any rights!”

“Cunt!” Ethan grabbed me around the torso. I struggled, spitting and swearing. Clapping his hand over my mouth, he dragged me out into the alley, and flung me hard to the ground. I leapt up, scratching a bloody gash across his face. Whirling around, he dealt me a back handed smack that sent me crashing into a garbage can. I crouched on the ground, ready to spring again. He just laughed as he lifted me up to his mouth.

I fought hard, weakening fast as he drained me to the point of helplessness. Searing pain overtook me. He threw me down. I struggled against the darkness, trying to raise my bleeding head from the ground and pull myself together, but no matter how hard I tried it wouldn’t budge. Ethan’s figure loomed in the darkness, his breathing heavy and heartbeat rapid, prodding me with the toe of his shoe. “Suffer among the vermin, in graveyards and sewers, cut off from your blood, and the protection of our house, a bleeding wound for all to feed on! Perish in pain and despair.”

“*Leisha Brookings...*” Joe mused, wondering why the name seemed so familiar. Then a blinding light flashed before his eyes. Lee Brooks, No one had ever seen her but Lydia! *Who was Lee Brooks?* He nearly shouted it, “Lee Brooks is a *vampire*?”

“She knew what needed to be done. I did my part, and so did Kurt. Together we pulled off this magnificent illusion.”

“Where did you get that kind of money?”

“Kurt kind of borrowed it from Brovik.”

“He *stole* it? No wonder you’re hiding! But why are you withholding data from your own partner? But she’s the one who duped you, isn’t she? Why Mia? Why is she so dead set on keeping you away from Kurt?”

“Divide and conquer. She and Kurt never really saw eye to eye. She thinks Kurt controls me.”

“Shit. How long have the three of you been partners?”

“Not long. For a long time I hated her guts. I might have hated Ethan but I was out on my ass without any support—and you know how that goes.”

FIFTEEN

* * * *

I needed cash quick, so I sold my butterfly necklace to an antique dealer downtown, and found a sublet searching the ads in the Village Voice. It was very small, a studio, in the basement of a building in Chelsea, but large enough for a creature who'd spend her nights roaming the city streets in search of potential prey. It was mine for as long as I could pay a thousand a month and take care of the plants. The furnishings were sparse and functional. Except for a few photos and posters on the walls and one black Japanese vase on the counter there was no decoration.

At first I wouldn't leave the tiny apartment until hunger got the better of me. As soon as I was sated I'd hurry back to my basement lair and huddle on the futon watching television, reading or listening to music, shocked by the sudden change in my fortunes. Finally boredom won and I took to the streets. Ah, life in Manhattan without my master, a chance to revel in complete anonymity. No one noticed me or saw any reason to run away screaming in horror. Guys would give me a second look or sometimes make an animal sound but no one really cared if I lived or died. After thirty-six years of Ethan breathing down my neck it was a relief.

I'd go to a coffee shop around the corner for a light meal and to read the newspapers. I'd order a decaf cappuccino, wrapping my hands around the warmth and enjoying the aroma. No one gave a damn if I drank it or not. Afterward, I'd explore a different part of town. On nights they were open late, I went to museums. After a lucrative kill, I'd splurge on tickets to the theater or opera. I went to a lot of movies.

So far, I hadn't seen any of my own kind, which suited me fine. I spent the rest of that first winter like this.

I saw no *Immortyls* for almost a year. I wasn't sure if I was happy about this or depressed, because I was horribly lonely. I couldn't just strike up a

friendship with a mortal or take a mortal lover, after a few weeks he or she would notice my irregularities and there would be problems.

Then one night, I polished off a drug dealer and had a little money to burn. A play I wanted to see was set to close, so I went to TKTS to obtain a ticket. I had time to kill before the show, so I went to an upscale bar and ordered a Virgin Mary, sipping at it while I scanned the crowd, scouting for potential danger. The place was packed with the pre-theatre crowd, noisy and convivial, older couples and well-dressed young people engaged in conversation but this was the kind of expensive place a passing Immorty might frequent. A youngish man in wire-rimmed glasses sauntered up to the bar, striking up a conversation about how dreary the season was and how he hoped next year would bring something other than revivals and overblown London musicals. I half listened to his droning, when the hairs on the back of my neck prickled. *Immorty scent. Male.*

I looked around—couldn't see him. I was safe in a crowd but remained wary. Whoever he was, he was coming closer through the crowd of mortals. Then I saw his face. I knew this one.

Philip was dressed in black leather, his dark hair shorter, sporting a neatly trimmed beard and mustache, a diamond stud glittering in his ear. He wrapped his arms about me and kissed me. "Darling child, what on earth have you gotten yourself into?"

The man I'd been speaking to excused himself sheepishly.

"Who's that?" Philip asked, as he watched him depart.

"Indigestion," I answered. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

"And you're in a pickle, wench."

I shrugged. "Been this way a year."

Philip whisked me over to a booth off to the side, recently vacated. "Come, we need to talk." He sat down close to me, keeping his voice low. "I came

as soon as I could. Ethan came to London just last week. He's at his wit's end with Leisha. I fear she'll kill him if she gets the chance."

"No great loss."

"You're coming home with me."

"I'm not going back to him!"

"I'm not suggesting it. *I'm* taking you in. You can't stay here alone. I don't need to spell it out. Ethan was ready to dump Leisha onto the streets, but she's far too dangerous to us. Brovik is furious. I'm not certain how he'll punish Ethan. Leisha was working very closely with us, and her disappearance caused uncomfortable scrutiny from the authorities. Brovik had no idea Ethan was behind it, until I called Kurt and told him everything. After recovering from the initial shock, Kurt suggested Leisha come to work with him, and for the present you come with me. He'll smooth things over with the old one and meet us in London as soon as he can get away."

"Oh, will he now?"

"Get off of it, Mia. After all these years, Kurt still cares for you."

Not wanting to re-open that wound, I changed the subject. "So, what do you think of her?"

"*Formidable*, amazing looking but *well...* It's best the old one keep an eye on her."

I gave a sarcastic roll of the eyes. "I'm sure he'll find good use for her."

Philip took me by the hand. "C'mon, let's gather up your traps."

I refused to budge. "I'm not going. This is where I belong. For what it's worth, I'm free. Even you won't put a leash on me again."

"Mia, we're blood kin. I pledge my protection as a brother. I place no bonds on you. Listen to me, if I take you in the stigma of outcast is removed."

“I don’t give a shit what they think of me.”

“You can’t survive out here alone!”

“I’ve managed so far.”

Philip sighed. “Maybe you have a place to live and managed to get a hold of some money, you’re a smart wench, but you’re living on borrowed time, my darling. What do you think will happen when the Wolf gets wind of this? Do you think Dirk’s forgotten how you humiliated him?”

I shook my head. “No one gives a shit about me.”

He shook his head. “Hopefully Kurt can persuade you. He gives much more than a *shit* about you.”

My heart skipped a beat in spite of itself. “Fucking liar, just like the rest...”

“Don’t blame him for that nasty trick Brovik played on you. Kurt never meant to deceive you. Honestly, Kurt knew nothing, had no part in it. I swear. The boy has a mind of his own.”

“He’s in his sixties now, hardly a boy anymore, but even if he is all you claim, Brovik won’t let him near me until he figures out an angle to benefit him.”

“If ever two were destined for one another...” Philip took my hands, enfolding them in his own. “When Brovik first approached me with this possibility of harnessing immortality, I was skeptical to say the least. You and Kurt are the only ones who understand the pitfalls of this endeavor. Only a slave understands the dangers of absolute power.” Philip’s face looked careworn as he raised my hands to his lips. “Please Mia, say you’ll come home with me.”

I leaned my forehead against his. “You’re my only friend but I’m sorry. I love you but if I can’t go with you. I’ll stay here, even if it means I die here. I’ve got to go.”

I got up to leave. Philip hugged me. “I’m always at your service, little one. You need only call and I’ll come.”

I withdrew from his arms. “Gotta ticket to a play, maybe we can get one for you?”

“I have to go back—business matters.”

I hugged him. “Goodbye, old fool.”

He slipped a knife into my bag. “Be careful, sweet sister, I wouldn’t lose you for the world.”

“I can handle myself, remember? I’m the Bird of Prey.”

“Kurt *will* come, Mia, now that Ethan is out of the picture. Don’t turn him away.”

The aching loneliness I’d staved off in the past months washed over me. I hesitated. Why not just go with Philip and find out? But to go was to accept Brovik’s yoke around my neck again. Not even the sweet temptation of Kurt would make me give up my hard-won freedom to that bastard.

“I’ll think about it.” I pushed my way out of the bar and into the chilly spring, breathing in the crisp air. Mortals filled the streets like so many cattle, but I barely noticed their scent as I made my way to the theatre. My mind was occupied with everything Philip had told me. Maybe all Ethan had said about Kurt was just another of his myriad lies. Maybe Kurt was everything his letters and our brief meetings promised. For the first time in decades, I saw a ray of hope.

But despite Philip’s prediction, Kurt didn’t come. Loneliness gnawed harder now that I’d given it a fresh opening. I chided myself. Kurt had no interest in me except to further Brovik’s plans. His master’s love was the only thing he desired. It was a very shrewd philosophy, actually. He remained Brovik’s prized possession, while no one cared if a cast-off like me lived or died.

I didn't see Philip again for a long time. In fact, I didn't run across any Immortyls for a long time. It's a big city and I never haunted the same place often. Ethan had told me there were sewer rats there, so I was always careful to mingle in crowds of mortals, but aside from seeing furtive dark shapes and hearing whispers from the shadows, I never encountered them. Still, there was the omnipresent problem of taking victims down in private venues where one wouldn't be observed. I couldn't kill in hotel rooms or apartments. Those measures were only taken in extreme circumstances. It was much better to lure them to a secluded spot, where I could easily dispose of the remains, or ambush them unawares in some dark and forsaken corner, but once I strayed away from mortal eyes, I left myself vulnerable to attack from my own kind, and as Philip had warned, my luck couldn't hold out forever.

Inevitably, one night a pang of hunger awakened me. I was pretty good at reading the early warning signs now and took Ethan's advice to feed early before my judgment was impaired. Hopping a subway uptown to the park, I took down a would-be rapist, taking a dozen nice thick gold chains, a diamond ear stud, some cash, a watch and a gram of coke. Not a bad night's hunting. After I slashed the throat with my hunting knife to disguise the teeth marks, I dragged the body into the trees and hid it under some brush, scooping out a shallow grave for burial. Then I stopped off at the Turtle Pond to wash off the dirt and gore.

I followed the path up to the Belvedere Castle and stood for a while on the overlook, surveying the deserted Delacorte Theatre across the water, reflecting on my own little *Winter's Tale*, cast out to the elements at the mercy of wild beasts like the infant Perdita. Yet this is what I wanted, wasn't it? Freedom— yes—but not complete solitude, cut off from my own kind however reprehensible they might be. Post-feed languor washed over me. Stretching out on the stone railing, I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the cool wind wash over my face, wishing for someone to share the zipping and popping inside of my veins. Kurt materialized in my mind, looking as he did standing on the terrace in Italy, skin like porcelain and eyes filled with light. His hand reached out to me and he smiled. I might have joined him in my fancy if the smallest sound hadn't alerted me, the snapping of a twig and soft footsteps.

My hair suddenly stood on end. *Danger!* As I rose to my feet, I caught the scent, *two, males, unfamiliar* from the direction of the Ramble. Company was on its way, and I doubted it would be congenial. The wind was in my favor and chances were they didn't scent me yet. I took off like a spooked doe down the hill and through the trees toward the streets. The brightly lit Museum of Natural History and eighty-second street subway stop lay ahead. I didn't dare waste a moment to look behind.

I thought I was in the clear at last, when one of them headed me off, catching me just as I ran through an underpass. He dragged me off into the trees where his companion waited.

As the moon came out of the clouds I got a good look at them. *Rat*, almost grown up, dressed in much the same fashion as I, in jeans and leather jackets, pale white. Both had piercings in their lips, noses and ears. The taller one smiled down at me struggling in his arms. "We've been hunting the park for years. Never found anything like you."

"Let me go."

The other crossed in front of me. "Not a very warm welcome."

They had no accents, recently made in the U.S.A, still very human in appearance, too many little twitches and gestures, and no class.

"Mmm. Pure uptown. Whose baby are you?"

I didn't let on I was afraid. "There are four million mortals on this island. Find one of them to bleed."

"Nothing like that. Just party with us."

"Ever heard of the Northman?"

They glanced at one another.

The taller one shrugged. "Cat's some fucking Viking or something."

“See the ring on my finger? He finds out you’ve been bothering me you can kiss your sorry asses goodbye, got it?”

“Never heard one of them letting their women run around Central Park on their own. Come on babe, we’ll give you something pretty.”

They didn’t bother with more conversation. The tall one held me while the other raped me. Then they switched places. Afterward, they argued the easiest way to drag me back to their lair. The tall boy pulled a gun, jabbing it into my ribs. “Listen, no funny stuff babe, you’re going to come along like a good girl. Once we’re home you’re going to do what just we say or we’ll bleed you. Got it?”

“I’m the Northman’s blood. You can’t do this.”

The shorter one laughed. “The Northman won’t give a shit about some cast off piece of tail.”

“Take the ring,” the tall one said.

I lifted my legs, kicking the one holding me in the groin. He doubled over in pain, clutching himself. While he staggered to his feet the other cold cocked me with the gun. Everything went black.

When I came to, they were dragging me to the street, still arguing about what to do next. I spotted a large, African-American beat cop and screamed bloody murder. The two of them dropped me, and took off into the park again. The cop ran over and knelt down beside me.

“You okay sweetheart? Those punks hurt you?”

I wiped blood from the corner of my mouth. “I’m okay.”

His huge brown hand reached out to help me to my feet. He frowned as he observed my torn clothes. “They mess with you? You should go to a hospital. I’ll call an ambulance. We’ll pick them up. They won’t get far. “

I shook my head. “I’m fine. Just want to go home.”

He looked doubtful. “If you say so. Stay out of the park at night, you hear? It’s no place for you.”

He patted my shoulder. I headed downtown along Central Park West. They’d taken all my cash, so a cab was out of the question. I was completely broke. I didn’t think I could feel much worse than I already did, but these two proved just how fragile my situation was. Tears jabbed my eyes as I walked the long blocks downtown. I’d been so stupid to let down my guard and for what, a fantasy of someone who couldn’t care less if I lived or died?

Months went by before I saw another. From time to time I caught sight of the shadowy figures that seemed as wary of me as I was of them. They didn’t seem to mean me harm, and I was tempted to call out to them out of sheer loneliness, but they’d always quickly slip out of sight.

Then I started to encounter what I came to term my “suitors”. A cast-off is fair game to the old ones and their alphas. Manhattan is neutral territory, and they’re just as attracted to its opportunities as mortals. Not that they came specifically in search of me, but if they chanced upon me they availed themselves of the convenience. A few even offered to take me in. I once had the unparalleled privilege of entertaining Kalidasa, the huge, quivering mound of lard that was the chief elder. Disgusting. These suitors were no more welcome a sight to me than to Penelope but they didn’t hurt me, well, not enough to kill me, just enough to make it fun for them. They compensated me well for my trouble. It helped pay the bills.

Spring passed, summer arrived again, the second on my own. It turned hot and unbearably humid. Air so thick you could cut it with a knife. Mortals spilled out of buildings like blood. Luckier ones had air-conditioning or escaped to summer homes by the sea. Even I wasn’t invulnerable to the sweltering greenhouse. I went to the movies to deal with the heat and boredom and tried to hunt closer to home, where there was less chance of meeting other vampires. On sultry nights mortals lingered along the waterfront, seeking sex, drugs, or both.

One of these early mornings, I made a quick kill of a junkie on the piers then dumped the body in the Hudson, amusing myself by thinking up a

fitting epitaph for the deceased as he slipped below the oily brown water. A television jingle I'd heard years before popped into my head.

Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. Oh, what a relief it is.

Breeze kicked up, cooling the sluggish air. I ran my fingers through my hair and shivered. The wind felt like a tongue on the exposed parts of my body. I toyed with the idea of picking up a mortal, but they're generally disappointing sexually. I sighed, resigning myself to relieving my tension manually at home, when a footstep soft as a cat's paw fell on the pavement. Turning around, I sniffed but there was no scent. Whatever it was it was upwind. A heartbeat, a little faster than a mortal at rest came toward me, closer and closer. Now I scented him, one of us, male and very close, possibly a *sewer rat*. I took off running, but he called my name in sweet voice.

“Mee-ya?”

I stopped, heart pounding, and turned around slowly as a slight figure emerged from the shadows into the streetlight—so close I felt his breath on my face—an arm's length away. Dressed in a blue button-down shirt, jeans and sneakers, he looked like a student. Breeze ruffled his honey-colored hair as the streetlight caught his remarkable eyes, sending another, deeper shiver down around my pelvis.

“Kurt?” I whispered, believing him a hallucination brought on by narcotics in my victim’s blood.

He smiled, the nerve of him. I snapped out of my reverie. “What took you so fucking long?”

“Forgive me. I’d have come sooner...”

“But Brovik wouldn’t let you, and you always do what he says like a good little boy.”

I stomped away, but his plaintive voice stopped me, “I fought hard to come here.”

I whirled on him. “He needs me to give some politician a blowjob? Or do you handle that exclusively now?”

If my insult hurt he didn’t flinch. He was much more concerned with other matters. He glanced around nervously. “Can we go somewhere private to talk?”

“I’ve nothing to say to you.”

Kurt displayed the characteristic stillness of our race, a carefully honed ability to disguise emotion. He’d had the best tutor and reflected his master’s indomitable calm. But I sensed turbulence swirling under the surface. He lowered his head for a moment then looked me straight in the face with those eyes. *Zap!* “I know what you think. Hear me out. I’m offering assistance.”

“Don’t need it.” I broke away toward my apartment.

Kurt caught my arm. “Gaius has dogs kennelled here. It’s only a matter of time before Dirk crosses your path.”

I turned to face him. “I can handle him.”

He gave me this sad puppy dog look. “*Please Mee-ya, I’ve come such a long way.*” I hesitated. “I’ve been very stubborn about you.” He held up his slender fingers. “I threatened to leave, and I hold Brovik’s empire in these hands.”

“And he holds your life in his.”

He shrugged, a small smile warming his face, a very different kind of smile than thirty-four years before. “How much work can he get out of me dead? We’ll go somewhere to talk, yes?”

“We’ve got two hours till dawn.” I started across the street. “This way...”

He fell in beside me, unhurried, contemplative, his head slightly bent, as if counting cracks in the sidewalk. He glanced over. *Zowie!* Those eyes got

me every time. “Brovik and Ethan had a huge quarrel. Ethan dumped Leisha on us and disappeared.”

“And now she works with you?”

He touched my arm. “Hush,” his voice fell to a whisper, “listen, scent the air. Anything?”

I shook my head. He frowned. We walked the remaining block to my apartment in silence. I was still trying to figure out if he could be trusted.

“This is it,” I said, as we stood before my building. His bewildered eyes took in the battered, industrial exterior. “Come on.” I unlocked the door and pressed the button for the elevator.

As I unlocked my apartment door and switched on the lights, a couple of roaches skittered across the wall, disappearing under a baseboard. Kurt blinked at the glare, giving the apartment a dubious glance as I sat on the futon, kicking off my boots. I glanced up to catch Kurt staring. He turned abruptly to the window, pulling back the drape.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Gaius’s dogs.” He scanned the street below. “They followed me earlier tonight. I believe I’ve finally lost them. Have you been bothered at all?”

“Two rats accosted me in the park.”

He faced me, stricken. “Were you hurt?”

“If being raped is hurt, yeah, I guess so.”

“I’ll make it stop.”

“You can do that?”

“I have connections. Brovik’s made me *responsible* for you.”

My hackles rose. “I’m your *concubine* in other words?”

“According to the code, I cannot take one.”

“He’s giving *me* as a toy to keep you playing contentedly at his side.”

“His intention, not mine.” He looked away, somewhat embarrassed.

“Should you choose however—that would be entirely different.”

“Now you’re being truthful.”

He turned his eyes on me. I could swim in them forever. “I never lied to you.”

“You kept things back.”

“In my position it’s expedient.” He turned away to examine a picture on the wall, the flat’s owner, a West Indian dancer. “Who’s this?”

“Beautiful, isn’t she?”

“It’s dangerous to take mortal lovers.”

I decided to have a little fun with him, dropping my voice into a smoky register, “Sometimes love is worth the danger.”

Kurt turned wide-eyed, disconcertingly teenaged. “You could be found out.”

“She’s on tour.”

“On tour...” he mused.

“She’s not my lover,” I finally confessed. “It’s a six-month sublet.”

Relieved, he took in the tiny apartment. “You should have a decent flat. I’ll set up an account for your upkeep.”

“I don’t want Brovik’s money.”

Male ego took over. “It’s *my* money.”

“No one puts a leash on me.”

“Ethan left you penniless.”

“My suitors pay well.”

He winced. “There’s no need to—prostitute yourself.” Frowning, he tilted his head slightly to the side. “It’s wrong, that they use you so. You’re not a bird of prey, *Mee-ya*, but a woman in a very strange set of circumstances.”

He lightly brushed my cheek with his fingers. Tenderness was a lash and he laid it on hard, not out of cruelty, but it had the same effect. I pulled away.

“Don’t.”

His expression fell with his hand, distraught and sincere. “Forgive me. I want only to help.”

“No barter between friends, Kurt.”

His eyes, if possible, became wider. I treated myself to a good long look. *Zing!*

A shadow of a smile escaped him. “Friends then?”

“Sure could use one.”

I tentatively stepped toward him. He turned away, examining the piano in the corner. Opening it, he ran his left hand over the keys. His face relaxed subtly, as he struck a chord. “You play?”

“No, it came with the apartment.”

He tried another chord. “I could teach you. You are musical. Philip says you have a lovely singing voice.”

“I’d be far too intimidated. You played great concert halls.”

“A world ago...” he muttered, turning his attention back to the keys, tinkling, fooling. He longed to play but was too modest to show off.

“I’d love to hear you play.”

His face curved into a bittersweet smile. “Sometime perhaps...”

“It would mean so much to me.”

He looked up, a kaleidoscope of emotion playing in his eyes. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

“In that case it will be my pleasure.” He sat down, touching the keys lightly, getting a better feel for the instrument. I shivered, imagining those beautiful hands on me. Suddenly, Kurt was transported into another realm, where the pain and bloodshed of our world was left far behind, a place of infinite peace and beauty. Caught as I was in this nightmare, I marveled at how simply this act of sitting down at an instrument could take him so far out of himself. Or did it lead him back to his true self? Wherever it was, I longed to go with him.

“What would you like? Perhaps...” He cocked his head slightly to the side. “*Chopin?*” He blissfully launched into a nocturne. “Yes, Chopin, I think.”

I closed my eyes. The nocturne washed over me, beyond gorgeous, liquid notes dancing in my veins like blood. I collapsed onto the futon and lay back with my eyes closed. It went on and on through every part of me. I sucked it inside, but it was too powerful and lovely. Only an angel could distill the essence of heaven and I was too far from a state of grace to receive it. I tried to hold on and wrestle it, but it eluded my grasp leaving me breathless. Was the victim’s blood that tainted with drugs? I opened my eyes again to see if I were hallucinating, but there he was as lovely as the dawn. “Amazing.”

He shrugged. “The instrument is only fair, for you I would do better.”

I rose to my feet, shaking. Surprisingly, I was able to place one foot in front of the other and cross the room to the piano. If I couldn't hold the music, I *could* hold the musician. Despite the ethereal appearance, *he* was flesh and blood. I laid my hand on his arm. It was warm. I leaned my head against his and reached out to his face. His eyes closed as I caressed his eyelids and cheekbones, tracing the graceful line of his nose and lips down his throat, drinking him through my fingers.

"You're beautiful, Kurt," I whispered, like a prayer.

"So they tell me," he muttered.

My lips touched the artery on his throat, pulsing warm against my mouth as the engine of his heart pumped the blood through his body. His breath came harder as my mouth explored.

He stopped playing. "You want this?"

"I've wanted you from the first night I saw you."

He took my face in his hands. "I'm not like Ethan, or the others. I swear. I'll never hurt you, Mia."

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

Our mouths found each other, long, deep, his slight frame blending perfectly into mine. Ethan once accused me of falling for a memory of my first love, and yes he did feel like the boy I loved as a girl. I slipped off his shirt and caressed him, sweet, smooth and slender, skin creamy rose petals touched with pink."

Joe coughed, uncomfortably. "Mia. I really don't need to hear this."

"Jesus, what a prude. I will tell you this, I've been with hundreds of men and he's by far the best lover. It was amazing to be made love to by someone who also depended on this skill for his survival. For once I wasn't taken. I was *gifted*.

Afterward, he fell into a peaceful slumber, bittersweet smile on his lips. I just sat there looking at him for hours, Psyche gazing on her Eros. I'd never seen anything so lovely.

Notes on the piano, not in rhythm, no particular order. My eyes opened on Kurt, shirt thrown over his arm as if had been in the act of dressing, but had been distracted by the piano, idly tapping at the keys, slender muscles fluttering under smooth skin, eyes darting over the keys, lush lower lip bitten in concentration. *Oh my.*

I sat up, the sheet falling in loose folds around my body. “Hello.”

“Hello,” he answered, not looking up as his fingers picked out an unfamiliar bit of music.

“What’s that?”

“My own composition.”

“Beautiful.”

He scowled. “If I ever finish...”

“Brovik’s made an accountant of a great artist.”

Kurt smiled slightly. “I’m much more than *that*. I thought perhaps I should go back to my hotel and not inconvenience you?”

“You kidding? I want you to inconvenience me, *again and again*. Do you have to go back soon?”

He fixed on that distant point where all the marble hardness of his features melted away, until he was vulnerable as the boy I once knew. He found the notes he was looking for and began to play softly as he spoke, “Brovik called before you woke. I told him I’ve— uh— found you. I’m free to stay awhile.”

“How long?”

He looked up, smiling impishly. “How does *eternity* sound?”

I was sucked too dry by Ethan to offer him much. It was too easy for him to fall victim and I drain him of all I lacked. “Kurt, I don’t like men very much.”

Amusement played over his face. “This is a warning?”

“You know what I am.”

He shrugged. “I’m not as callow as I look.”

“But your body is forever eighteen years old, and feels all the immediacy of that age.”

He looked up from the keys with an ironic little gleam. “Well— lucky you.”

“Lucky me.”

One moment he was all he looked, a lovely, charming boy, the next something else entirely, wise, knowing and deep, an ancient elf of the forest whose solemn eyes concealed a wellspring of passion and oceans of rage, that escaped in tantalizing drops when he played or made love. Yet, I couldn’t taste all he contained, because he was Brovik’s slave and I was forbidden to trespass there. I had to be content with his body, but believe me Joe, it was a great consolation prize.

I held out my hand. “Come back to bed.”

He lay down on his back. I raised myself over him, tracing the tattoo on his forearm with my fingertip. “The blood didn’t fade it.”

“Brovik said it could be removed. I refused.”

“Why?”

Shadows fell over his face. “To remind me...”

“Of what?”

Kurt looked into a very different place than the one he saw when he played. “Bargains with the devil. It’s too painful to speak of.” He pulled me down to him, whispering into my neck, “For now, let’s forget...”

SIXTEEN

* * * *

Kurt held some major demons at bay, but respecting his wishes, I didn't question him further and thoroughly enjoyed his company. Longing for the experiences we'd both missed as mortal kids, we'd hang out in the Village among the students, not to hunt but to hear their banter and feel their excitement. Here Kurt wasn't his usual solemn and dignified self, but frenetic and playful, as we ran from shops and restaurants to downtown clubs, and then back to my bed.

He liked rock music, which surprised me, spending hours searching out stores where he bought piles of records that he paid for with an American Express card, while I looked enviously on.

"Must be nice to buy whatever you want," I said, on one of those occasions.

Boyish mischief sparkled in his smile. "What would you like? I'll buy it. Anything. How about the entire store?" He picked up an album from a display. "Here, Chopin, I will buy for you— yes?" I shook my head no. "Why is it wrong to accept gifts from your lover?"

"That's what my suitors call the jewelry they give. I consider it payment for services rendered."

"Not from me. You liked the books I used to give, didn't you?"

"Books are different. You were sharing a part of your soul." I pressed up against him. "You're the only gift I desire. The gift that keeps on *giving*, and *giving* and *giving*."

He choked back laughter. "Please, you embarrass me."

We passed a *bodega* on the way out of the record store, where large buckets full of red roses and other flowers stood reminding me of the night Ethan

had danced with me in the ballroom full of roses, presenting me with rubies. Now that was barter. But it also reminded me of the last moment I stood in the sun. I brushed away the demon whispering in my ear, as Kurt searched among the flowers, until he was satisfied with one perfect, blood red rose.

He kissed me softly and presented it. “This won’t offend?”

“No, it’s lovely. Thanks.”

We wandered hand-in-hand down Bleeker Street, among crowds of unsuspecting kids, blending in perfectly, old enough to be their grandparents and not quite human.

I’d often waken during the day to find Kurt talking business on the phone, with mortals in Brovik’s employ. He’d sometimes leave at twilight to meet them dressed in a dark suit, and tinted glasses, his golden curls gelled darker. He appeared slightly older, if hardly his true age. I’d wrinkle my nose, telling him he looked like a nerd. But, on those evenings when he was free, I’d wake to find him at the piano composing.

He still responded evasively whenever I attempted to draw him out about his past and we never discussed our condition. We acted as mortal lovers do, went out, had fun, and then fell onto my futon to make fevered love. But finally one night, vampirism rudely butted in.

A light burned in the bathroom when I awoke. The rest of the apartment was dark, the heavy blinds and curtains still closed. Drowsily aroused, I rolled over to snuggle up to Kurt, but he was gone. The sun hadn’t set yet. Where was he?

Rising from the tangle of bedclothes, I crept up on him as he stood naked before the bathroom mirror, staring at his reflection, skin blanched yellow-white as the inner flesh of an almond. His shoulder was icy cold, but he didn’t even flinch when I touched him.

He turned to me. “The beast awakens.”

He was a ghastly caricature of himself, his lush mouth gray and drawn, face etched stone hard, usually luminous eyes flat, blue buttons, hair brittle and dull. Pushing me aside, he grabbed his clothes. I switched on the lights. He covered his eyes like a movie Dracula when sunlight floods in on him, snarling—literally, “*Shut them, damn you!*”

I snapped them off, and lit one of the hundreds of votive candles we’d bought the night before. A small flame furtively licked up the sides of the glass as Kurt pulled on his jeans and shirt. He glanced at the tattoo on his forearm for a moment, noticed me looking and snapped, “Why do you stare?”

“I know the best spots...”

“You want to see this? It arouses you sexually?” He pressed his body against me, for once not raring to go. “By all means accompany me. See what I am.” He pushed me away. “Get dressed! Can’t stand it much longer.”

A delayed feeder. He’d waited until the last possible moment to feed, when instinct pushed one mercilessly to become a ravenous, mindless beast. Why? Ethan said this was dangerous.

We finally emerged into the street. “The piers? The river is good for dumping them.”

“No.” He set out at a brisk walk. “My flavor has a distinctive smell.”

I followed him through winding streets, past residential buildings to a maze of darkened warehouses and meat packing plants. No parked cars or mortals loitering on the sidewalks. He stopped in front of a storefront displaying questionable literature and Nazi war memorabilia in its window. The lights were off. A cage-like grill pulled over its front.

“The price of free speech,” I muttered.

Kurt scowled. “*Back entrance.*” He wheeled into an alleyway leading alongside the building, scanning until he found a door with a bare light bulb burning overhead. “Wait.”

Soon the door opened. Kurt pulled me into the shadows as a young man stepped outside, tall, head shaved, wearing fatigues with the arms cut out and black combat boots laced with white. Tattoos on his worm-white arms proclaimed white power, a large Swastika figuring prominently on his right shoulder. The skinhead lurched by without noticing our presence, reeking of stale beer, cigarettes, hashish and the salt-iodine odor of sex. A well pickled herring. Kurt hung back for a moment, restraining me with his arm.

He inclined his head, releasing his grip and we set off behind the intended victim, with footsteps too soft for mortal ears. The skinhead staggered around a corner, until he came upon a construction site. A skeleton of a gutted building rose above the plywood barrier surrounding it, a motionless crane standing sentinel, a steel Brachiosaurus. Next to it was a meat packer's building. Dumpsters stood in front, stinking of rotted flesh. Kurt's intended victim faced one, preceding to unzip. Pungent piss filled the air. The skinhead laughed to himself, tracing a wet swastika on the side of the dumpster. He turned around in our direction, zipping his fly. Kurt stared at him curiously, head tilted slightly to one side.

"Whatcha looking at, faggot?" Kurt remained silent. "Hey, your boyfriend deaf?" The victim gave me the once over, tugging his crotch. "You can do better than that skinny runt, sweetheart."

Kurt strolled up to him, tracing the swastika on the bared shoulder. "You offend me."

The skinhead stepped back, grinning. "I get it now, Jew boy."

Kurt stepped back, smiling, and let loose a savage kick that sent the skinhead sprawling into the street, groaning and grasping his groin.

"Little sonofabitch!"

Kurt walked a slow circle around him and then cobra-rapid, grabbed the victim around the throat and dragged him behind the dumpster with me panting right behind. Kurt forced him to his knees, tearing into the neck, clamping his hand over the mouth to prevent screams.

After drinking his fill, he offered the victim to me but he was already dead, no delicious fear to taste, only cold blackness and alcohol. I spat the bitter blood out, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I let the body fall and turned around.

Kurt's color rushed back into lips, hair and eyes regaining their luster as he stood, a silent, avenging angel. Another need overtook me. I pressed against him. He was *very* hard. I moaned and twisted against him, wanting him right there behind the dumpster. I reached down to unzip his jeans, but he pushed me away, turning back to the limp body, prodding it with his foot. Then to my horror he picked it up and began to strip flesh away from the corpse like peeling a banana, tearing off slabs of red muscle tissue to reveal the gleaming blue-white ribcage. Cracking the ribs open, he reached into the chest cavity, tearing out the heart, squeezing it to pulp in his fingers like a strawberry and then licking it off. A pile of offal lay at his feet on the sidewalk, with what resembled a human head still attached, bloodless shreds of flesh and bone—organs spilling out onto the sidewalk—loops of intestine, lungs, stomach popping out of the gaping wound. I stood gagging as Kurt nonchalantly walked away.

“You can’t leave this!”

His eyes narrowed to blue slivers. “It’s a slaughterhouse.”

“Maybe so but we can’t leave this here.”

He shrugged, shoving the remains indifferently into the dumpster, staring at the gore on his hands. Blood was smeared and spattered all over his face. Couldn’t walk through the streets with him looking like this, I had to *lick* him clean. I pulled him behind the dumpster to clean the blood from his face and hands with my tongue. Panting, he grabbed my face, kissing me hard as he pinned me against a wall. “Now we fuck!”

“You’re completely covered in blood...”

He tugged at my jeans and turned me to face the wall. “Don’t care.”

We fucked standing up, crying out like animals.

When we made it back to the apartment, Kurt collapsed on the futon, moaning. Alcohol in the blood was affecting him adversely. He sat up suddenly, vomiting blood onto the floor and all over his clothes.

“Boy, you’re a fun date.” I ran and got a large plastic garbage bag from under the sink and wet towels from the bathroom. “You should know better than to take a drunk,” I scolded him as I mopped up the blood. “Did you want to get caught? Let’s get these clothes off.” I took off his lightweight brown leather jacket, much nicer than anything I had. I sponged it off, throwing it onto the chair. Tearing off his shirt, I stuffed it into the plastic bag and then stripped off his jeans. I wiped as much blood as I could from his body and threw the towels in the bag, too.

“Come on, you’re taking a shower,” I said, as I hefted his arm over my shoulder.

I put him under the shower to let the water sober him up. He grimaced and groaned. Ethan had sometimes taken inebriated victims but they never affected him quite this much. I was careful never to indulge too much myself. Silent, Kurt leaned back against the wall of the stall as I washed the rest of the blood away. Now and then a little shiver of pleasure convulsed his body.

Afterward, I wrapped him in a robe I’d stolen from a hotel, and led him out to sit on the chair while I disposed of the bloody sheets. While I remade the futon, Kurt sat behind me, staring at his hands even though they were free of blood. It was far from sunrise but the best thing he could do was to sleep it off.

“Lie down.” I took him by the hand like a child.

He loosened the robe, letting it slip down his body to the floor, sinking to the futon in my arms with a bemused smile. “*Fuck?*”

“Go to sleep. You’re in no condition.”

“*Always ready.*” He moaned, grasping the sides of his head in pain. “*Scheisse!*”

I soothed him, laying myself alongside him. “It’s all right— sleep.”

While he slept it off, I took the bag down to the incinerator and dropped it in. After that was done, I went back to clean the bathroom. As I came back into the room I noticed Kurt’s passport and wallet lying open on the coffee table. I picked them up and flipped through them. The passport was Norwegian, counterfeit. It named him as one Erik Nordstrom, giving his age as twenty-one years, birthplace as Oslo. I picked up the wallet, a few credit cards and about fifty dollars cash were inside and his Norwegian driver’s license, also faked. That wasn’t what I was looking for. A faded, creased photograph was tucked behind the driver’s license, a slender dark-haired man, a pretty blonde woman, a dark haired little girl and Kurt, about thirteen years old, his parents and his sister, a world ago, as he’d said.

He cried out in his sleep. I hugged him tight. “Kurt, are you all right?”

He muttered a name under his breath, “*Fritz...*” and fell quiet again. His eyes moved rapidly below the lids, in a deep dream state, his mind unguarded. I pulled the sheet back from his throat and ran my fingers down his carotid artery. It was too tempting not to take advantage of this, and peek inside at his secrets, not out of malice but concern. I bent my head down and touched my lips to his ear. “Kurt,” I whispered. “I want to share with you.”

He mumbled, but didn’t wake. I licked the artery to find the pulse. I knew it wasn’t right, but I did it any way. I nicked him in the throat, and sucked on the small wound. *Sweetness*. Light washed into me for a moment. I climaxed, clinging to him, but suddenly cold mist swirled in around us. As it cleared, I saw a younger version of Kurt huddled on the ground, wet and covered in mud. Through the shadows emerged a tall figure, wearing a uniform with a long coat and cap emblazoned with a skull. The SS officer lit a cigarette and for a moment cold, gray eyes illuminated in the blaze. He dragged on the cigarette, regarding Kurt’s wretched state, walking around him in a circle. From his coat pocket he drew a photograph. I didn’t need to see it to know what it was. He held it out to Kurt with one hand and beckoned with the other. Kurt’s apparition rose as if in a trance and disappeared in the man’s embrace.

Suddenly, Kurt cried out. I drew back as he sprang up. “*Fritz!*”

“Are you all right?”

“A nightmare,” he muttered, falling back to the bed. He rubbed his head, wincing. “What time?”

“One.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Must call Brovik.”

“It’s daylight there.”

“He hardly sleeps.” He tried to sit up, grimacing in pain. “*Scheisse!* Bring the phone.” He rubbed at his neck and felt the mark. He took his fingers away and stared at the drops of blood on them in disbelief. He looked up at me, horrified. “What have you done?”

“You were having nightmares.”

“How could you? You *knew* I was unguarded!”

“I just wanted to understand.”

He grabbed me roughly. “What did you see?”

“A man, in an SS uniform.”

“How can I ever trust you again?”

Kurt got out of bed. I tried to stop him. “You’re still not well— his blood made you sick.”

“Don’t touch me! ” He looked frantically around. “What have you done with my clothes?”

“Don’t you remember anything? You vomited blood everywhere. I had to throw them away. There’s your jacket. I was able to save that.”

Kurt sank down onto the futon, and picked up his wallet. “Brovik warned me about you, but I didn’t believe him.” He noticed something was missing. He picked up his jacket and rifled through the pockets, panicking. “Where is it? What did you do with it?”

I picked the picture up off the table and handed it to him. “This? It’s your family, isn’t it?”

Kurt stared at the old photograph, the present melted away and he looked back to a time and place he didn’t want to go. He sighed heavily. “I was out when they came for us... I’d just turned fifteen. I had some flowers in my hand I’d picked for Luka, my little sister, weeds really, no one bothered to plant anything that spring. I missed them by minutes. One final goodbye I was spared... or robbed of. The SS were still outside of the building, loading people into trucks. I ran.

It started to rain. I’d hidden in a storm drain. The SS found me, crouching like a drowned rat, covered in filth. The officer recognized me from my concerts, and said I was to be taken to his quarters for *special treatment*. You know what that usually meant? It would have been better than what he did to me. They took me to Dauchau, and took everything away, my clothes, my hair and gave me this.” He held out his arm. “I had a wallet on me— this picture and my identity card were all that were in it. They took that too, then led me to him. He said if I cooperated, I’d be shown preferential treatment. I’d work for him as a servant instead of slaving in a factory. He handed the photograph to me, smiling. His smile was... obscene. Not even Brovik knows what I did to stay alive. Bargains with the devil Mia, it was just the beginning for me.”

“You were just a boy. You wanted to live. That’s not a crime.”

“Perhaps not, but all I’ve done since then is.”

He laid his head on my breast. I caressed the fine, burnished hair as his tears flowed. I hated myself for revealing the face of this demon. What did I have to offer him but the deceit and trickery I’d learned from Ethan? He’d given up a tattered remnant of his soul that he’d guarded vigilantly for over forty years and what did I have to ease it? His heart beat against me, the rushing

blood through his body called to me again. I could give him the intimacy only two Immortyls can share. What others took against my will, I'd give to him freely.

"Take my essence, Kurt."

He pulled away, stammering, "Mia, this one thing Brovik forbids. He says it will bind me to you."

"It's too late. I've already had yours. He owns your body Kurt, he can't own your soul."

"Do we have any to speak of?" He hesitated, eyes brimming with vestigial moisture as he took my hand between his fingers, tracing the network of veins. Touching the palm to his lips, weighing the consequences of this action, a look of resolve came over him. His mouth opened and clamped down on my wrist. I shuddered as the points entered then retracted and his lips wrapped around the wound. We collapsed on the mattress as he pressed his own wrist against my lips. My tongue licked the slight bulge of the artery before taking him. His skin was sweet and salty. As it broke, a warm wet fountain bubbled up over my tongue.

Rhythm throbbed throughout him, penetrating every fiber. A soaring voice, an angel, sexless, ageless, sang as the blazing white light inside of him spilled over into me, sending shadows and phantom shapes to the edges of the landscape. The light and song grew brighter, cutting through the confusion, far too bright for poor battered Psyche. The god came forward in all his glory, face too bright to look upon, arms and wings outspread to gather her to him.

I cried out, pulling away from Kurt. "I'm sorry! I can't!"

He blinked. That same terrifying light blazed in the depths of his eyes as a look of utter astonishment came over him, a glissando of wonder escaping from his lips. He clasped me to him, his tears wetting my skin. "Don't spoil this."

I called myself every foul thing I could think of. My heart was dead and buried somewhere among the wreckage bearing Ethan's name, all that remained was to feed off of Kurt's, and it was seductive, to suck up pieces of his soul he proffered like rubies dripping from his hands."

Mia paused, a single tear gliding down her cheek. Joe was deeply disturbed by what she'd told him about Kurt. In his work he'd run across human monsters that preyed on kids sexually, the worst kind of ghouls. It destroyed lesser individuals, but Kurt had turned into cold, hard stuff and survived, ultimately finding a unique outlet for his revenge.

She stared into space. "This demon gnaws and gnaws at him. He delivered himself into my hands, gave me his deepest, most painful secret and he's suffered for it every hour, since that night."

SEVENTEEN

* * * *

“Kurt stayed a month before Brovik summoned him home. I ached for him when he left. The cramped apartment felt empty. The piano stood silent, gathering dust. I reverted to my old habits, wandering the city night after night, evading the odd Immortyl.

Kurt would drop in unexpectedly, clutching a single red rose like a mortal boy to give to the girl of his fancy. I’d take the long stemmed flowers and reflect on the masses Ethan had showered me with. How very like Kurt to make the elegant gesture. How very like Ethan to make the ostentatious.

Years passed. Manhattan changed yet again. Established old shops and restaurants gave way to franchises. The pin stripes of the eighties faded into to the flannel shirts and torn jeans of yet another generation. Somebody figured out that in the year 2000 a lot of computers might not know what year it is, probably some clerk making fifteen grand a year. Computers would crash and planes would drop from the sky. A sheep was cloned and newspapers proclaimed a breakthrough in the field of genetics. It was the post era, post modern, post feminist, and post gay. Here a post, there a post everywhere a post, post. Ethan was right. Time was a spectacle.

Aside from Kurt, my callers were few. I remained far out of the loop as progress on Brovik’s work went. Kurt wasn’t at liberty to tell specifics and I didn’t bother to press him because I’d come to think the whole thing impossible.

Ethan had disappeared, Kurt told me. Brovik hadn’t heard anything of him for years. I hoped he walked the streets of hell.

Then, one early summer night in the last year of the tumultuous century of my birth, Kurt arrived with his customary floral offering. “Got a surprise for you...”

I hadn't seen Philip in over a decade. He extracted himself from my impulsive embrace and gave me a long look. "You have roses in your cheeks again. The boy is good for you."

Kurt came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Philip's been working too hard. We must show him a good time."

"Dreadful, isn't it? Imagine me, respectably toiling away at meetings and all sorts of nonsense. I don't suppose you two would know a decent nightclub?" He eyed Kurt and me catching up on lost kisses. "No. I doubt you two get out much."

"We come up for air occasionally," I said.

Kurt kissed my neck. "Let's take him out on the town."

"Shall we then? I have a car outside."

Kurt shook his head. "Let's walk. It's a beautiful night."

We went to a club in Tribeca but my libidinous pal, Philip hardly noticed the young and lovely mortals swarming the dance floor. He didn't dance, which he loved, even though asked several times. You couldn't really call it dancing, it was just kind of a ritualized groping, but Kurt and I joined the milling mass of bodies while Philip sat at the table, nursing a glass of wine. At Philip's age you could tolerate a little more.

He was very quiet and watchful of Kurt and me when we joined him again. I waved away the thick pall of smoke hanging around us with the drink card on the table. "What's wrong with you tonight? This brooding isn't like you. Jesus, you're acting like Ethan."

Turned out to be the wrong thing to say, Kurt winced as if someone had just staked his heart.

Philip cleared his throat. "Little one, there is something I must tell you."

"Can't it wait until later?" Kurt complained. "Must you spoil my evening with her?"

“What?”

Kurt frowned. “Tell her, I can’t.”

“Ethan is back in Virginia. Actually, I just left him. He’s coming to New York to see you.”

This bit of news got me in the gut like Ethan’s foot. I turned to Kurt. “I’m not going back to him.”

He took me into his arms to reassure me. “You don’t have to. He has no rights over you anymore.”

Philip watched us keenly. “None, indeed.”

“Then that’s that. No problem,” I said.

Kurt flashed a dazzling smile. “There, you see, Philip.”

“Yes, I see clearly.”

I had to turn away from Philip’s probing gaze. He didn’t look convinced. Damn him, he understood how much this news knocked me off-kilter. I kissed Kurt’s mouth to reassure myself, deciding he was definitely still my favorite flavor. Kurt for his part was unusually attentive, caressing my hair and whispering erotic temptations into my ear. I couldn’t think of going on without Kurt, but I hardly knew how I’d react when Ethan showed up.

Kurt’s cell phone jangled and he excused himself to answer it outside.

“Why is he coming here?” I asked Philip when Kurt left. “He must know I’ll spit in his face.”

“He’s got this idea that he wants to make amends.”

“I won’t see him.”

“I haven’t told Kurt yet, but Ethan wants to settle property on you. He owes you this. I relayed this to the ancient, and Brovik feels you should accept. It

would smooth things over financially for you. It's rather embarrassing for him that you insist on earning your own way. It looks like he can't take care of you."

"No, it means he can't control me, and to accept anything from Ethan suggests a contract. I'm not assuming the position."

"No one says you must, but I must warn you Brovik is having second thoughts about your little liaison with Kurt. Truth be told, he's concerned about the boy's loyalty."

"Kurt has never expressed a disloyal thought. He's dedicated everything to this cause."

"The boy is in love, and you know how Brovik feels about the influence of women, particularly yours."

"I've never done a thing to turn Kurt."

"So I assured him, but he hasn't remained where he is for a thousand years without being cautious."

"Philip, I'm scared. You know how Ethan is."

"Kurt is the one for you, but you're too stupid to see it. Don't let Ethan destroy this. He will, if you give him an inch."

I spied Kurt, a seraph wending his way through the clouds of smoke issuing from hundreds of cigarettes dangling from mortal lips, politely rebuffing a boy who stopped him to ask for a light. Kurt shook his head, flashing a sweet smile. The smoker, not so easily put off, grabbed Kurt's arm, and whispered into his ear to ask for something else. This was a good time to come to his rescue.

"Let's get out of here. This smoke is awful," I said to Philip, rising and pushing through the crowd toward Kurt. "Come on, I need fresh air." I took Kurt's hand and dragged him away from the hopeful smoker.

The sky was unusually filled with stars. In Manhattan, we generally make do with artificial lights as they tend to make stars invisible, but on nights of extreme clarity they shine, fewer than in other places but they manage. We decided to walk down to the battery. Philip was subdued as we looked out over the harbor toward the green goddess Liberty. Kurt said little, clinging to me like he was afraid I'd run off. Conversation felt strained and stale.

Philip bid us goodbye once we returned to my place, and drove off to a hotel. Kurt watched the first flashes of dawn lighting the horizon from my window. "You're uncertain of what you'll do."

I laid my head against his shoulder. "I don't want to lose you."

"You've never told me, Mia," he whispered. "You know I *do*."

I brushed back a stray lock from his forehead and kissed his cheek. We couldn't even speak the word, maybe because it had too many bad connotations for us. It's much bandied about, but seldom true. It has much more to do with ownership, and being owned, or just plain bloodletting. This thing Kurt and I had, was unheard of.

Red-orange stripes illuminated his face as he peered through the blind. "I can't bear to lose you again."

I hung onto him. For once in my lousy life something went right and I was in grave danger of screwing it up in my usual style.

But Ethan didn't make an appearance. I was relieved, thinking he'd changed his mind. Then, a few weeks later, hunger drove me out of my air-conditioned lair to a bar at the South Street Seaport, where I picked up a Wall Street sleaze, coercing him with the promise of a blowjob in his car. He didn't realize I was the one seeking oral gratification. I dumped him in the East River and headed uptown beneath the FDR. Cars horns blared as the traffic above came to a standstill.

The streets were damp with early evening rain, making the air like inside of a greenhouse. Pavement steamed with oily vapor. A sluggish little wind stirred the muggy air. My neck prickled as I caught the scent.

The smell of fish from Fulton Street masked just about everything but then I heard it, a heartbeat, getting faster and far too close. I couldn't quite tell where it was coming from. Too many sounds bounced off the pillars supporting the roadway. I assumed a fighting stance and pulled my knife. "Show yourself!"

Ethan stepped from behind a pillar. "Very good, if you find yourself in an uncertain position, show no fear." The hellish heat couldn't thaw his beautiful coolness. He looked as if he never sweated—skin sculpted of snow, midnight hair perfect except for the one unruly lock, white shirt crisp and dark suit smooth. The diamond on his finger matched his icy eyes. "*Cara mia*, my soul."

How could he put all those syllables into that one syllable word? For a second I was dumbfounded. Then thirty-six rotten years flooded back into my memory.

"You bastard!"

He leaned against one of the pillars casually folding his arms. "Miss me?"
"I've kept myself busy."

Distaste flooded over him. "So, I've been told." He offered his arm. "Come with me?"

I held my knife toward him. "Get any ideas and I swear I'll cut your throat. You showed me how, remember?"

"You were a bright pupil, yet you succumbed to the charms of a boy."

"He's not a boy."

"It's Brovik's way of punishing me."

"Kurt and I don't feel that way."

A knowing smile danced on his face. "Just how do you feel, *cara mia*? Tell me you love him and I will trouble you no longer."

He did exactly as I knew he would, and I still couldn't say it. I was at a loss for words and as you know Joe, that's something.

"I don't answer to you anymore!"

I passed him without taking his arm. He gestured to a parked car. I refused to speak to him as we drove. We ended up at Gramercy Park, a quaint old neighborhood surrounding a charming gated park. He pulled over to the curb to let us out and led me to the door of an apartment building. Alarm bells started going off as he ushered me inside.

"What's this place?"

He laughed, hitting the button for the elevator. We rode to the very top floor. He unlocked the door to an apartment, switching on the lights.

It was all there. Paintings and drawings I'd collected hung on the cream papered walls. All my books, including those from Kurt reposed in shelves built into the wall flanking the fireplace and little art objects I'd picked up in our travels arranged tastefully around the room. Deep blue Chinese rugs and simple light furnishings completed the decor. Every vase was crammed full of creamy roses. Ethan's hand was in the details.

I gasped, turning to him. "I'm not coming back to you."

"These trappings are meaningless."

"Lots of memories attached."

"Not all good, I'm afraid."

"Not good *at all*."

He stood in the doorway, dejected and weary. "My life ended when I cast you out."

I looked away because I didn't trust myself. Was it always so? Would I always feel this for my maker? Was it the blood that bound us together? All the nights I'd spent rehearsing the things I'd say to him, my grand

vindication scene. It was no fucking good. He still got to me. I turned, trying desperately to hold him off. “I’m not giving Kurt up.”

For a moment he was silent. “I did you a great wrong, Mia.”

“You did me a great *many* wrongs! You owe me Ethan but this has nothing to do with money. Why *really* did you make me a vampire? Don’t give me the usual line about seeing me in that play.”

“I loved you.”

“Bullshit! You made me to get back at Brovik for Kurt. Don’t you know how much I’ve suffered because of it?”

“You were the dawn of a new day!”

“Don’t quote that fucking play to me!”

“It’s true! It is just as I say. Brovik promised a new world, Mia, but it was an evil place, without love, without honor. You were proud and strong. Nothing could stand in your way.”

“You saw a character in a *play*, Hilde... *the Bird of Prey*. Mia was just a girl, wanting to be loved! I aborted the only child I’ll ever carry to be with you. You had children. I never will. I’m a *woman*, but I no longer can give life, only take it!”

“I’m truly sorry for that.”

“And you threw me away like garbage when you finally figured out I wasn’t what you thought!”

“Don’t.”

“You abandoned your mortal children and you abandoned me!”

“Stop!” He raised his hand to me, but then slowly lowered it, his face stricken. “I *am* a monster, but I will always love you.”

He looked so much older than I remembered, his face lined with pain. I bent down and kissed his lips, and somehow the spell was broken. I knew for sure I'd never return to him.

"I'll always love you too, Ethan, but I can't stay with you."

"You choose Kurt?"

It wasn't the wild, terrible longing I had for Ethan. It was much deeper, down in the marrow of my bones. Kurt and I shared one skin. Tears rolled down my cheeks as the realization finally hit me. "After all you did to me, I thought I couldn't love *anyone*, but I do."

Ethan didn't acknowledge my words. He just got up, gathering his composure about him. "You'll find papers in the drawer of the desk. It's all yours."

"Not yet. All those years you hid so much from me." My fingers ran over the face I knew so well. "So many things I don't understand. Open yourself just once."

His face clenched. "All right— you should know. This I owe you more than anything."

I led him to a white silk-covered chaise. I loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. I brushed my lips down to the pulse. His still felt like satin on my skin as he kissed my wrist.

Light and sound filled my consciousness, hundreds of voices speaking at once all around us, the voices of his long memory. I saw glimpses of his past, his dysfunctional childhood, the tutor he'd fallen in love with, the baby girl he fathered with a slave, his unhappy marriage to Sally Anne and his joy in his two sons. All these demons he'd held close for so long.

Then inside me, wind howled and rain began to fall, bolts of lightning cut a ragged gash across the sky over a city with cobblestone streets. I knew it was long ago, New York, seeing it through Ethan's eyes. There in the gaslight stood Brovik, dressed all in black like a vampire in a movie, with a

long cape, and his flaxen hair blowing long and free. He held out a gloved hand and smiled serenely, so that Ethan let go of the weapon he held.

Brovik took him to a nearby house where inside stood a table piled with delicacies and bottles of wine. Ethan was thinner and pale as if he'd not had decent food in a long time. Brovik told him to sit and eat. Ethan fell on the food ravenously, with not one shred of the fine manners he took such pride in. Brovik sat beside him, speaking low and pouring wine. Ethan looked on in wonder as Brovik told of sea voyages and exotic places.

Brovik held out his hand. Ethan hesitated then clasped it in his. Brovik led him up the stairs to a bedroom and took Ethan into his arms. Now snow began to fall, blizzards of ice and cold filled me. Ethan and Brovik stood under the pines on Brovik's island, but no Bauhaus concrete and glass palace stood there yet, only a dark wood structure like a large cabin. Ethan turned away from his master and trudged off through the snow, leaving Brovik, enigmatic and cold as the northern lights blazing overhead.

Many years passed in his mind, I saw Ethan returning to his ruined house and tearing vines away from the brick. He wandered far and wide, searching in many different places for something he couldn't define, frightened and lost in a world that was rapidly changing.

Then I saw Philip and Ethan on a boat approaching Brovik's island where his sparkling house now stood on the hill. Great longing filled me as Ethan's memory drew closer to his master's dwelling, exactly like the same magnetic force binding us.

Brovik met them on the shore, holding his arms and embracing them both. As they went into the house, Brovik gestured to the long stairway where Kurt was descending. A searing pain rocked me as I took in my lover's shining youthful face looking adoringly at his master. The pain was Ethan's more than mine. Brovik bid him to sit at the piano and play. As Kurt wove his angel's song, jealousy consumed Ethan. Angry words passed between Ethan and Brovik. Kurt trembled with rage and launched himself, a small, deadly missile. Ethan caught him by the throat and squeezed. Brovik's voice thundered and all the glass in the house shattered, raining down as Ethan dropped Kurt on the floor. The glass cut their faces and hands. Brovik

took Kurt into his arms to protect him. Ethan turned away and left them together bleeding among the shards.

Snow blew into Ethan's face and eyes, stinging his open wounds as he boarded the boat and departed. A plan formulated itself in his mind, of the only thing he could do that would wound Brovik as deeply as he had been wounded. The snow fell and fell and when it cleared I saw the neon glitter of New York, as I knew it in the fifties, where rainbows of light and spilled petroleum sparkled on the wet pavement and a cacophony of car horns, human voices and rumbling subways filled my ears. Ethan sat in a hard chair in the small theatre where we met. I entered like in the dreams I had before he found me, in my Hilde costume, but not looking as I saw myself but rather in an idealized light where my eyes burned like a *Valkyrie*.

It hurt too much, I tried to pull away but he held me fast to him to allow the vision to conclude where he willed. This was the place I feared to go, the demon I kept tightly locked within me. I lay cowering, drenched in my child's blood and my own as he took me up in his arms and his love filled my veins.

A falcon was loosed. She soared higher and higher above the city and over the seas to the frozen wastes of Brovik's dominion until she finally stooped toward the old one, to tear out and devour his living heart.

Ethan pulled away in pain, falling limp and panting on the chaise. I collapsed against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. An idea suddenly took flight, terrifying me. A face swirled into my brain, female, her dark eyes lined in kohl. Her deep red mouth spoke a soundless command. My voice fell to a shocked whisper. "*I'm going to kill Brovik.*"

"Are you mad? Don't even speak such nonsense."

"It was all in my vision. I saw myself as a falcon devouring him."

"Visions in the blood are but phantoms of memory and emotion. Events are not exactly as they happened or will for that matter. It is fantasy, nothing more!"

“You don’t see as I do. It’s Sanjivani— she’s working through me somehow — like I’m her reincarnation.”

Ethan sat up and buttoned his shirt. “That is complete and utter nonsense. Haven’t I taught you better?”

“Ethan, I saw it *inside you*.”

“It is ridiculous, a hallucination.”

He was right. It was completely crazy. “You’re right. I’m just overcome by all this.”

He straightened his tie, rising to his feet. “There is some scientific explanation for these memories in the blood. They are not precognition.”

“Wishful thinking, I guess.

“We never had this conversation.” For some reason this entire conversation had upset him deeply. Or maybe it was just the fact that I’d essentially dumped him for good. He broke away, heading for the door, but just as he put his hand on the knob he hesitated. “Goodbye, Mia. You know where to find me. I am *always* at your service.”

I couldn’t shake the vision. It *was* ridiculous I tried to tell myself. I was just worked up from being with Ethan and seeing all the things I did confused me. My imagination had intruded on what I saw or wanted to see. Brovik also told me you can’t really gauge the total truth from such visions— or was that just because he didn’t understand? Only Sanjivani and I shared this gift.

Kurt showed up unexpectedly two weeks after Ethan, wearing a dark suit to match the expression on his face. He’d learned from Philip about my new digs, and looked them over with a scowl. “This place reeks of Ethan.” He brushed past me into the bedroom, setting down his laptop and small bag down on the bed. “So. Has she been here?”

“Who?”

“Leisha! She’s gone, cleared out! Things are missing Mia, files, data, money. Brovik thinks she’ll search you out.”

That threw me for a loop. “Why me?”

Kurt looked very worried suddenly. “Because I have access to everything, and you have access to me. She was working on the acquisition of a new company for us, but she doesn’t have the kind of money to buy it herself.”

Threads insinuated themselves as intricately as the pattern of embroidered Indian shawl covering the table, as if Sanjivani’s fingers were weaving them.

“Brovik’s dogs are searching for her. They’ll be watching you closely now. If she approaches you, they’ll contact him immediately.” He took a good look around the bedroom, running his fingers over the silk draperies.
“Didn’t spare any expense, did he?”

“What will Brovik do?”

“She’s tried to cozy up to me, but I’ve never trusted her overtures of friendship. Asking about you and whether I’m happy in my work— just to gauge the depth of my loyalties.”

Another strand insinuated itself into the pattern. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

He winced. “He’ll execute her.”

“I won’t be party to that.”

Kurt took me by the shoulders. “If you don’t cooperate, he’ll do the same to you!”

“Not if he never knows. If I see her, I’ll warn her, and you won’t tell.”

“Mia, you put me into an impossible position!”

“Brovik puts you in this position. You’d be better off far away from him. But you’re still in thrall to him, aren’t you?”

His anguished expression didn’t make me feel better.

I scowled. “He’s using me to keep you in line and I don’t like it.”

“What choice do we have?”

“You never heard me say this. Promise me, Kurt.”

“It could be very bad for us.” He pulled the drape aside, looking out over the park. “That park looks like a cage in the zoo.”

I snuggled against his shoulder. “It keeps people out, not in.”

“Cages come in all kinds. This one we stand in is particularly fine.” He broke abruptly away. “You can’t accept a record album from *me* but from *him*, well that’s entirely different. You accept *real estate*? ”

“Don’t be stupid! I sent him away.” It was now or never. Taking a deep breath, I finally said the terrifying word, “I love you, Kurt.”

Those beautiful eyes turned arctic cold. “Don’t play Mia, now is not the time.”

I gestured to the piano I’d bought for him. “Would I have gotten that if I didn’t plan on keeping you around?”

“For me?” He caressed the concert grand in the bay window. He couldn’t resist opening it and touching a key. A beautiful rich tone filled the room. He struggled to remain cool but his voice trembled, “Doesn’t this qualify as barter?”

“No chains Kurt, not for us, not ever. We belong together. It’s that simple.”

A tear glided down his sharp cheekbone. “You sent him away for good?”

“I love you, you dope. What else could I do?”

Kurt's voice grew harsh and strained, "It grows difficult... with Brovik. I've seen too much bloodshed. I dislike Leisha, but I won't betray her. The dogs I can't help, but she's eluded them in the past."

"Hopefully she will again." I wrapped my arms around his neck. "How long can you stay?"

His bittersweet smile crept over his face. "How does eternity sound?" We kissed. His mouth never tasted sweeter. We held on so tight it left momentary bruises. He rummaged in his jacket pocket, bringing out a pretty little carved box. "You can accept this now?"

I turned the box about in my fingers, admiring the intricate ivory inlaid design. "It's gorgeous— thanks."

He shook his head. "Open it. After all these years, I'd hope to give you something better than a box."

I opened the catch. Nestled inside the satin lining was the same butterfly pendant I'd sold years before. I was astonished. "How on earth?"

"I started looking for it as soon as you told me about it. The shopkeeper you sold it to contacted the purchaser. I offered three times its value, but that's beside the point. It seemed only right it be returned to you"

"You've kept it all these years?"

I trembled as he took it out and hung it around my neck. Tears ran down my face. He reached out and brushed them away. "Someday, Mia, we'll walk hand-in-hand in the sun."

EIGHTEEN

* * * *

A few blissful weeks later, Kurt reluctantly left. Every time I went out from then on, Brovik's *dogs* would trail me around town at a discreet distance. I couldn't even hunt without them following. It was irritating, to be observed in such an intimate act, so I waited as long as I possibly could.

Finally, a Nor'easter blew in. Rain fell in sheets. I was ravenous now. So, in spite of the *dogs*, I headed to the park via subway.

Two dogs followed me out of the Columbus circle station into the storm. Wind whipped up through the cavernous streets. Stinging rain feel sideways as I set out toward the park, driven by a natural force stronger than the storm. The dogs cursed after me, taking shelter in a doorway to wait the rain out.

I sniffed out a vagrant, crouching beneath an underpass, and took him swiftly. It was easy to dig a makeshift grave in the muddy ground beneath the trees to bury the body. I wiped a film of perspiration and rain from my brow when I caught a scent more seductive than the corpse's alcohol-sweat stink. Immortyl female with a hint of Chanel Number Five. The soft swish of her garments preceded her. Her step was sure and swift.

A brown velvet voice called out in the darkness, "Mia?"

That husky note was engraved on my brain. I rose from my muddy knees. She melted out of the shadows, auburn hair purple with rain, lioness eyes glittering amber. Her warm golden skin gave off a burnished glow. It still hurt to look at her, she was so fucking amazing.

"Been looking for you for weeks, girl."

"It's a big town."

She stood perfectly motionless, her control already finely honed with the kind of eerie stillness that usually takes decades to develop, not an errant muscle twitching in her chiseled face, long hands hanging at her sides. “We need to talk,” she said.

“Shoot.”

She looked around. “Can we go somewhere out of this rain?”

I shook my head. “Brovik’s dogs, they’re watching me but I gave them the slip. They don’t like the rain but we can duck under that bridge for a minute. Make it quick if you want to live.”

Annoyance flashed over her. She nodded and we both slipped under the sheltering underpass.

“You won’t turn me in to your little boyfriend, will you?”

“Why should I protect you?”

She looked as if she wanted to say something nasty but changed her mind, appealing to me instead, “I never wanted this.”

“Ethan gave you the history lesson?”

“Just when I thought nothing could be worse.”

I was tired of games and wanted her to spit it out. “You want something from me?”

“I need your help.”

“I’m the absolute bottom of the social order. What in hell’s name can I do?”

“Kurt’s real sweet on you, but I’ve never been able to win his trust. Always checking up on me, spying, sent dogs to follow me when I went out, sneaky little thing.”

“Brovik’s orders obviously.”

“But his loyalty is only up to a point. Kurt fought with the old man for months before he first let him come here. Now every time Brovik wants him to do something ugly, he pressures Kurt with threats to your safety. Your boy is stretched.” She crossed her arms over her breasts. “I’ll lay it out to you. Got a chance to acquire a small biotech firm. I need money, big money. Brovik has the numbers. It can be diverted, a little here, a little there. Kurt knows everything about Brovik’s little enterprise— has the scientific contacts— but most importantly he goes to Zurich once a month. Lots of money passes through his lily-white hands.”

“Kurt’s life wouldn’t be worth a dime. Neither would ours for that matter. Besides Brovik is already a step ahead of you.”

“He can be taken out. There has to be a way. In the meantime, I’d hide you both somewhere. We’ll be partners. Anything we eventually make we split.”

“Kurt isn’t in this for the money.”

“He likes to live well Mia.” She looked at my muddy knees. “I know for a fact he doesn’t like to see you scrounging in the pockets of dead mortals.”

“That’s all over. Ethan’s back.”

Now her face registered genuine shock. “You’re shitting me? You aren’t back with him?”

“No, he just gave me what he owed. I couldn’t do that to Kurt.”

She raked her eyes over my face. “The boy’s got it bad, but somehow I figured it wasn’t the same for you.”

“At first, Ethan had such a hold on me. You know how it is.”

She shook her head. “I had a life, Mia. I’m a damned good attorney and I worked like hell to get where I was. Filthy bastard stole all the things I’d achieved. Maybe you can’t appreciate just how much that means for a woman like me— but I’ll find a way. And let me tell you something, I

always get what I want." Her face and voice suddenly softened. I didn't trust it. "What about you Mia? It's a chance for you and Kurt to really break free. He's about to fall apart, girl. A little nudge is all he needs."

The thought was tempting but I couldn't see Kurt betraying his master for anything. "He's tough. It'd take a miracle to push him over the edge."

Her long soft fingers smoothed a lock of wet hair away from my face. Her velvety voice turned maternal, very seductive, "When I first saw you, I was shocked at how small and young you looked— like a beautiful child. When I learned you were still alive, I thought, how did she survive? Kurt told me how you've been abused out here. But you survived Mia, you're stronger than anyone knows. But I can see how tired you are of it all. I can shelter you, take you someplace safe, none of them will ever hurt you again."

Pheromone perfumed the air. She took my face in her hands and gently kissed me, tongue sliding softly into my mouth, over the tips of my fangs. Distant voices made the hairs on my neck suddenly prickle.

I pulled away. "Leave! Don't come back! I won't rat on you. Go!"

Her eyes registered pain and loneliness. The bronze goddess was actually flesh and blood? She pressed a card into my hand. "My cell. Call, if you ever change your mind."

"Go, the rain's letting up. They're looking for me."

She rose, scanning, a tigress scenting the air. Dangerous. Unpredictable.

"I'll draw them downtown. Careful."

"Always am." She opened her coat to show a concealed pistol. "You do the same, little sister."

She melted into the trees and disappeared. Moments later, I scented my watchdogs on the bridge above my head. I set off running opposite Leisha's direction. They shouted curses, jumping down to follow me out of the park.

I laughed. I'd dodged another bullet so to speak, but my luck was rapidly running out.

NINETEEN

* * * *

New Years Eve. The last of the millennium arrived. Although Kurt wanted to spend it with me in New York, Brovik, worried his systems might crash, kept him home to troubleshoot.

Weird night, unseasonably warm and all this talk about the turning of a century and a new millennium was unsettling enough, without Sanjivani's ghost whispering in my brain. I needed to walk and walk, away from crowds to clear my head. I gave Brovik's dogs the slip in the throng milling around Times Square, and headed east toward Fifth Avenue.

Along the way, I passed one of those small exclusive hotels Immortyls tend to frequent, where one of my suitors had once taken me for his recreation. I glanced warily into the lobby window as I passed, wondering what might be lurking there.

I was horrified to spot a familiar figure seated on a small sofa, toasting champagne with a group of academic types.

Someone opened a door. He caught my scent immediately and looked up. I'll never forget those yellow-green eyes, even disguised with steel-rimmed glasses. The metal briefcase in his lap abruptly snapped shut as our eyes locked. Dirk smiled slowly, rising to shake hands with the mortals.

Sloughing off my shock, I bounded away, but he caught me at the next corner, backing me up against a building with a knife against my throat.

"My, what do we have here?" He tugged my short-cropped hair.

"You're the proverbial bad penny."

"I've a string of beauties at home. Chasing self-important tarts isn't my line these days. But why not avail myself of the convenience?" His finger

hooked the butterfly around my neck. “Brovik’s monkey gave you this? The diamonds in this case are much nicer.” He pushed himself against me.

“Go fuck yourself.”

“*Cunt.*” Dirk clapped his hand over my mouth, dragging me toward a car waiting at the curb. He pushed me inside, ordering the driver to floor it. I bit his hand. He yelled and slugged me hard. That was the last thing I heard. A needle jabbed my thigh and everything went black.

Severe hunger pangs woke me up but full consciousness eluded me. I kept falling and falling into darkness. He’d bled me. I was chained to a huge old four-poster in a darkened room, overhead track lights spotlighting me. My throbbing head was securely fastened to the headboard.

Dirk moved toward me, his huge naked frame covered in knotty muscle, reddish hair and bizarre tattoos. Lightening symbols decorated one arm and a death’s head the other. Serpents twined around swastikas on his chest. The shining stainless steel contents of a small case he held glittered in the light. Small liquid-filled bottles stood in a row on the bedside table.

His skull face loomed over me. “Awake?”

I gasped, “Blood.”

Dirk selected a silver scalpel from the case. A beam from the track light struck the surface and bounced off the wall. His unzipped my jacket and idly caressed my breasts.

“Here’s my proposition, Mia. Fucking Brovik’s monkey makes you very valuable to us. Gaius pursued him for years but he remains loyal. Think of the wealth of information in that golden head. He’d be far less pretty without it, don’t you agree? Just work it out of him to give me, or... I’ll make him quietly disappear. Perhaps when he makes one of his jaunts to Zurich? Brovik will never know what happened.” He held the scalpel to my neck. “How will the arrogant little cocksucker’s death taste?” He trailed the slender silver blade over my breasts and down my belly, slicing a red thread on my abdomen. “Will he beg for his life like all the others as I carve his

carcass up slowly, still alive, with this scalpel, bit-by-bit to put him into these little bottles until there's nothing left but his bones? Then, I'll tear out his heart to keep in a jar beside my bed to remind you." He licked my blood off the scalpel. I started shaking as he sat down on the bed. "Funny, I can't taste his taint. I really should kill you too for contaminating yourself, but if you do exactly as I say, perhaps I can forgive."

Dirk licked his lips. He wasn't bluffing. He was a sociopath before taking the blood and ten times more twisted and powerful now. Kurt was in serious danger. There was only one way out.

To kill a cast-off like me is no crime. A slave would be bad enough, requiring compensation for damages. But a cast-off kill a full-fledged alpha? A death sentence, self-defense or not, Gaius could take my head.

Light glinted off the shining surface of the blade. If only I could get my hands on it.

He caressed my breast. "I'll burn my mark here."

I swallowed my revulsion and tried the submissive tack. "Please Dirk," I whispered. "I'll do whatever you want. Just promise you won't hurt him."

He grabbed my chin. "You've never shown me proper respect."

I had laughed at the bastard, too much to be smart. It was pay back time for him in a big way.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. It was no work to look scared.

"Not good enough," he breathed into my face. He sank down next to me on the bed, pressing the scalpel to my throat. "You understand what I'll do to your Jew if you trick me?"

I bit my lip and nodded. He unchained me, cutting my clothes off with the scalpel, nicking me every so often until I was naked and bleeding. Finally he set the blade back down on the bed table. I cried with relief as he climbed onto me. Rape was better than death. The yellow eyes looking

down were loopy with dilated pupils. When he'd bled me he must have injected himself with some of the narcotic he'd given me. Ethan told me in that in Kalidasa's court the famed *adepts of the ancient arts* used hallucinogens in their erotic rituals, and other's used recreationally, but he'd had taught me it was very dangerous as it compromised one's reflexes. As you know Joe, it's difficult to judge how much can be tolerated since our systems work so rapidly. It was obviously affecting his judgment or he'd never have set that knife down. I took advantage and played along, fighting the urge to rip out the slimy tongue he forced into my mouth. I urged him on, maneuvering into striking position just as he pushed my thighs apart.

Noiseless butterfly's wings swept over to the bed table, touching cold metal. I pulled the sharp deadly little blade against my thigh just as he was poised to enter. I struck, cutting his throat in one neat movement as Ethan had taught me. His face froze in a look of surprise, the body still twitching as it collapsed on top of me. Arterial spurts of blood gushed out soaking the pillows and blankets, bathing my face and body. I hacked his head off and buried my face in the ragged stump, gulping down as much of it as I could before it grew too cold to restore me.

The entire collection of demons lurked in that abyss, all the tortured souls he had taken, pain he'd reveled in. A wasteland, inhabited by howling fiends with eyeless skulls— it had lived too long.

I had to get out fast but I was covered in blood and still flying from the narcotic. An ice-cold shower cleared my head. I found his discarded clothes, several sizes too large for me, thrown in a corner and dressed as well as I could. No time to waste on looking good. Gaius's dogs were sniffing outside. I spied Dirk's metal case. He was bound to keep a gun in there. I tried to open it but it was securely locked. I fished keys out of Dirk's trousers and a wad of cash that I stuffed into my leather jacket.

I unlocked the case and opened it. A loaded Glock sat atop a small velvet bag filled with diamonds. Beneath, I found a pile of computer discs in plastic boxes. They were labeled with a picture of Romulus and Remus. The wording said: *Romulus Laboratories Corp: Confidential.*

I grabbed the gun and snapped the briefcase shut. I was in huge trouble. Gaius would come looking for answers and I was the first place he'd look. Grabbing the case, I made my way into the hallway, scanning for the dogs. I couldn't smell them but heard their voices from a distance. I slipped out of the house and toward a converted carriage house that served as a garage. I ducked into the bushes and peered through the window. Three huge dogs sat inside playing cards and smoking. I had less than a second to plug all three. I held my breath and took aim, praying I could remember all Ethan had taught me. I squeezed the trigger and fired off six rounds into their heads.

In the garage, I found a can of gas and dumped it over the corpses. I threw a lighted match, and went back to do the same to the house. Stealing one of the three dark sedans, I sped off with my plundered treasure toward Manhattan.

TWENTY

* * * *

It was well past midnight when I hit Manhattan. No planes dropped from the sky and city lights still glittered in front of me. So much for all the millennium panic.

I abandoned the car on Eleventh near Fiftieth. The smell of horse was strong in the air. The slow, hollow clopping sound of a very tired coach horse returning to the stables came toward me. The female driver waved and called out Happy New Year. Well, it was in one sense. I'd just ripped out a big fat malignancy growing on the earth.

I pushed my way downtown through throngs of inebriated mortals around the Port Authority bus terminal, glancing behind, expecting Gaius's dogs already tracking me. There was no doubt in my mind Gaius would call for my head and Kurt would be the one dispatched to bring me to Brovik for questioning. Maybe we could run away together. Sell the diamonds. Go somewhere— maybe Leisha could help us.

When I finally returned home, Brovik's watchdogs were parked outside my building. I walked by them with a little wave. "Happy New Year, fellahs."

The car drew alongside me as the window rolled down. "Where you been, missy?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

The dog stuck his face out of the window. A network of old knife scars seamed it like a baseball. Brovik sure didn't choose 'em for looks. "Don't get fresh. You know— when the boyfriend is too busy to get away— old Cash could keep you company."

"Behave yourself, or I'll tell him you've been fresh with me."

Cash licked his thin lips, tossing long, pale hair back from his face. “We don’t work for that arrogant little prick, and the Northman’s going to want to fucking know where you been for six hours. Sweet dreams, doll.” He laughed as the car pulled away.

Shit.

I went inside and pulled up a floorboard and hid the evidence inside. I was in deep trouble now.

Two nights later Kurt was dispatched in Brovik’s private jet to fetch me. He appeared unexpectedly at my door, no rose in hand this time. He stripped off his jacket and gloves, tossing them on top of his laptop. “Mia, what happened? Tell me the truth! This is very serious!” He took me by the shoulders with less than his accustomed tenderness. “Don’t lie to me! Gaius is out for your blood. Did you do this?”

“Do what?” I broke away to hang up his butter-soft brown calfskin jacket.

Kurt grabbed me by the arm and spun me around to face him. “Don’t play with me! Someone set fire to The Wolf’s compound in the Hamptons. Dirk’s bones were found in the wreckage. Three dogs were murdered as well. Cash says you went missing for six hours on New Year’s Eve. A girl matching your description got into the car with Dirk outside of the St. Regis.”

I couldn’t lie to Kurt. “He dragged me into a car, bled and drugged me, chained me to a bed. He threatened me with a scalpel, said he’d cut you into little pieces if I didn’t spy for them.”

Kurt’s ivory face went alabaster. “Oh Mia, he didn’t! How did you manage it?”

“Fucking idiot was high. I played along until I got my hands on the knife, cut the bastard’s throat and hacked off his head, shot the dogs then set the place on fire.”

“You killed him to protect me?” He gripped my shoulders harder. “You must swear you never saw him. Mortal witnesses saw a girl with short dark hair outside the hotel. It could have been any girl, perhaps a call girl he’d engaged. You understand? They’ll put you to torture. Trial by ordeal.”

“I’ve been bled before.”

He winced. “Not like this. It can go on for hours. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Gaius is suspicious of his Alphas as well. They all despised Dirk, but they have more convincing alibis.”

I clung to Kurt, needing his calm logic so badly at this moment. “I had to do it!”

“I don’t blame you, I’d often wished to do so myself.” Kurt held me tighter. “Find the courage, Mia. Stare them down and you’ll live. I’ll do all I can. Ultimately, it’s you they must believe.”

“Fat chance of lying to the Wolf and getting away with it.”

“They have no real proof.”

“If it wasn’t for you, I’d say why not just end it?

He held me very close to him. “Don’t say that. Not now when we’re so close. Mia, we’re on the very brink. The organism is isolated!”

“Organism?”

“A symbiotic life form that inhabits our blood stream and invades our cells, mutating them. All we need to know is how this agent works.”

A chord sounded deep within. If my suspicions were correct, those discs I stole held an answer. “Where’s your laptop? You need to see something. When I wasted Dirk, he had this briefcase with discs inside, marked confidential. Something there is important enough to bring him here on New Year’s Eve in the middle of all this millennium bullshit.”

I retrieved the disks from under the floor. Kurt popped the first disk into his hard drive. A screen, bearing the she-wolf logo popped up. His eyes flitted over the menu as he took the mouse in hand, scrolling down to the words, *sequence codes*. He clicked and another screen came up. Kurt gasped as lines upon lines of letters appeared. It made no sense to me, but Kurt's face flushed with excitement as he began to scroll down the pages rapidly, his eyes growing very, very wide.

"Mia, do you have any idea what you have here?"

"Some kind of code?"

"Exactly, genetic code, this is a DNA sequence!" He pulled out his cell phone. "I must call Brovik."

I grabbed his arm to stop him. "Wait! It's proof of what I did!"

"We can't let Gaius crack this before we do. Brovik will keep this secret. Trust me."

"Maybe it's not what you think, maybe its DNA from a guinea pig or something."

"Gaius wouldn't send Dirk here for that. Of course, an expert must examine it. We may have isolated the agent, but if they've mapped the mutation. The two pieces put together could turn the tide. This is the real thing Mia, I'm sure of it. We must tell Brovik."

I grabbed his arm again. "No, he's never liked me. It's a perfect excuse to get rid of me."

"He'll reward you for your foresight."

"Maybe we can make use of it ourselves."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mia. We haven't the resources."

"No, but you have access."

He suddenly looked suspicious. “Who put this preposterous idea into your head?” It dawned on him. “You *have* seen her.”

“Three months ago. She has a line on this biotech firm.”

“Which she proposes to steal from under Brovik! He turned his eyes back to the screen, closing out the file. “I never heard this.”

“I’m not as optimistic as you about Brovik’s vision for the future. I try to see myself in it but I can’t. At the moment our relationship is convenient, but he could easily change his mind. We’ll sell the diamonds and run away!”

He had that same stricken look as when I’d stolen his essence. “Have you gone mad? I’m already risking my neck for you. There’s only so much influence I have, it’s wearing *thin*.”

“Exactly, you’re sick of all this. If Dirk *had* killed you, all Gaius would have to do is pay Brovik off for his losses. Yet, because I killed the scum of the earth I could be executed. Is that fair?”

“Of course it’s not fair! But we must survive until things change!”

“I’m offering an alternative. Think about it.”

“Impossible! We’d never make it without Brovik!”

“Which one of us *do* you love?”

Shadows of pain fell over him. “You know how it is... He’s my maker, but I’d give my life for you.” He popped the disc out of the computer, looking around furtively. “We can’t risk being caught with these.”

“You’ll have to leave him someday.”

“Not now, Mia, please, we must get you through this ordeal.”

“He’s threatened that something bad will happen to me if you don’t bring me to him?”

I'd never seen Kurt so close to losing it. "If I don't deliver you, he'll give Gaius leave to do as he pleases. Okay, we'll lock the discs up for now, and decide later what to do with them."

He called Brovik to tell him that he'd be bringing me back to Norway the following night. Then we made love, in the mad, abandoned and ultimately sad way you do, when you know it might be your last time.

TWENTY-ONE

* * * *

My jeans and leather jacket provided little protection against the sub-zero wind, as we boarded the ferry to Brovik's island. Kurt held me close to both keep me warm and from running away in terror. His eyes were troubled, but he smiled encouragement.

"Do as I say, we'll get you through this. They're very big on form. Even a slave gets the opportunity to plead her case and Brovik doesn't want trouble with Gaius any more than you do. Keep your head."

"I fully intend to."

I hadn't seen either elder in years. Brovik stood in front of the huge fireplace. Long, pale hair streamed over his shoulders, reflecting orange flames. Gaius sat casually, all in black, with four of his alphas standing behind, waiting to give me thumbs down. The alphas wore the usual dark clothing and grim expressions. It was meant to intimidate—and it was working. I struggled to maintain composure as Ethan had taught, Kurt clinging to my hand to steady me.

Brovik nodded coolly. "Thank you, Kurt. Leave us now."

Kurt looked him dead on, standing his ground. "No."

In spite of Kurt's defiance, Brovik's expression remained calm. "We'll discuss this later."

Kurt didn't budge. "You gave her to me."

Diego, an alpha with overly coiffed hair and a waxed black moustache sneered. "This isn't form. The boy has no right."

Brovik was at his chilliest. "He does if I give it to him."

Gaius's oily smile slid over his face as he leaned slightly forward in his seat to take the drama in. "Let the boy stay. His presence adds to the atmosphere."

Kurt would have killed him if he could. Gaius wanted Kurt in a bad way, and I do mean *bad*, involving sharp implements and chains.

Brovik was annoyed, but kept his considerable cool. "Let's get this over with. Mia, I'm sure Kurt has filled you in on why you're here. Did you have anything to do with Dirk's murder?"

"No."

Gaius put in his two cents. "Mortals describe a girl fitting your description with Dirk outside a hotel."

"There are lots of petite, dark-haired girls in New York, in case you never noticed. He hired a hooker, who looks like me—that surprises you?"

"Gaius, are you satisfied? She claims innocence."

The Wolf was nonplussed. "She's learned subtlety and deception from Ethan. It grieves me to harm this lovely, *talented* child but I've lost my second and some very expensive property."

"You've no proof the girl was there."

"Old friend, you want to spare the feelings of your beloved servant but the girl must be bled. We'll see if she tells the truth."

Brovik sighed, as if the entire thing were an annoying inconvenience to his nightly walk in the woods. "Mia, now is the time to confess. I offer you a swift and painless death."

"I didn't do it."

"You leave me no alternative."

Kurt retorted, “You heard her! She’s innocent. All of his alphas despised Dirk. They hired a girl to make it appear Mia was behind it. Look to your alphas, Gaius!”

Uproar started among the alphas. Gaius just sat there chuckling.

Brovik’s voice dropped into a deadly register, “Consider what you’re saying, Kurt.”

“I’ve withstood their insults for years. Dirk was the worst of them. The world is well rid of him.”

Gaius was highly amused. He gestured casually toward Kurt. “This pretty one is worth more than the lot of you dogs.”

Diego’s pasty face went red. “I won’t be insulted by this *rent boy*.”

Wow, they’d struck the heart of Kurt’s deepest demon, and I’d seen what happens when this one awakened. Kurt trembled from head to foot. I worried he’d spring at Diego, but instead he lashed out at him verbally, “I’ve met your victims— living in sewers. One who takes children isn’t fit to live!”

Gaius chuckled. “Who would have guessed the boy capable of such *passion*? ”

Kurt turned, North Sea cold, “You’re a *pestilence* on this earth.”

Brovik stepped between them. “Kurt, you overstep your bounds! Let’s get this done.”

Kurt whirled on his master. “No, you won’t do this!” Blue pinpoints of rage burned in his eye sockets. “Why must you constantly torment her?”

Brovik’s chill overtook the room. “Restrain her.”

Diego came forward bearing a pair of shackles. Kurt stepped between us. “Don’t you dare!”

Brovik dragged Kurt by the arm to my side. I'd never seen him so close to rage, seething, but on so tight a leash, that emotion escaped as a low, growl, "You claim her? Then it's your duty! Bleed her!"

Utter disbelief flooded Kurt's eyes. "You can't make me."

"It's clear your loyalty is compromised."

A realization finally struck Kurt, his voice fell to a shocked whisper, "You're *afraid* of her!"

"I fear nothing, especially not this *woman*. Do it or I'll give her to Gaius to do as he sees fit!"

I laid my hand on Kurt's arm. "I'd rather none of them lay hands on me."

Kurt took my face in his hands. "I swore to never hurt you, from the first night we were together."

"I told you not to make promises you couldn't keep."

Diego called out, impatiently. "How long will this take? Get on with it!"

Kurt took a deep breath. "*Forgive me.*"

I sat in the heavy chair, placing my hands behind my back as Kurt shackled me. Gaius leaned forward in his chair, immensely turned-on.

I looked up at Kurt's anguished face. "I'm ready."

He kissed my throat, his tears running over my skin as he whispered, "*I'm so sorry.*" His lips searched for the artery. I braced for the pleasurable prick of his fangs, not wanting them to enjoy this any more than they did already. A quick sharp stab—I willed myself to not cry out. Kurt held me gently. Heaven at first—but then hell opened. I choked back a scream. Kurt pulled back.

Brovik admonished him, "I'll tell you when to stop!"

I writhed in the chair as Kurt took more, struggling to remain quiet, but the pain was too great. A vise wrapped around my head and I screamed.

Kurt pulled back again. “More will kill her!”

Brovik nodded, “Enough, let her stay until she’s ready to speak.”

I panted, weak, and in pain, but Kurt didn’t let go. “I’m here, Mia, tell them.”

I gasped, “I did nothing wrong!”

Gaius rose, staring at my face in fascination as he circled us. “Let her stay so for three hours...”

Kurt was infuriated. “She’ll die!”

Gaius wasn’t impressed. “She’s made of the iron of Vesuvius. She’ll withstand a great deal more.”

Kurt soothed me, as I drifted in and out of consciousness, screaming with searing pain. No pain is greater to a vampire except the sun. Diego yawned loudly. Visions of Dirk’s severed head haunted me. I was terrified I’d scream out what I’d done, but the horror of his threat to Kurt made me hang on. I’d done *nothing wrong*. It was the truth.

Finally Brovik put a stop to it. “Enough. She’s withstood a full fifteen minutes longer than most. Ask her again and be done with this.”

Gaius rose, crossing the room. Kurt hovered protectively over me.

“Move aside, little *Amor*.”

Kurt’s eyes blazed. “No.”

“You are bold, my beauty.” Gaius reached out to ruffle Kurt’s hair, but Kurt pushed the hand away. The alphas sprang to their feet. Gaius backed them off with a casual wave of his hand. “Very well, I’ll ask you a final time, Mia. Are you guilty of these crimes?”

I struggled to look up at him. “No!”

“Indeed?” Gaius took my chin in his hand, whispering, “You could’ve been an empress, girl.” He released me, straightening up. “She sticks to her story, I cannot ask you to prolong this torture without taking her life. But hear me Brovik, if I find evidence of her guilt, I’ll execute her myself.”

“Understood.” Brovik stepped forward, laying his hand on Kurt’s shoulder. “Revive her.”

Kurt gave his throat, breaking skin with a fingernail, because I was too weak to do so myself. The pounding, burning subsided, and I was soon able to breathe normally again. But Kurt’s uncontained rage swirled, a million screaming harpies inside me. Things would be very different with him from now on.

Gaius called his alphas, “Come.” He clasped Brovik’s hand. “Thank you for your hospitality, and consideration in this matter.” Brovik nodded as the Wolf scrutinized his face. “You realize if such events come to pass it will be war between us?”

Brovik remained ever serene. “Understood Gaius, but the woman is innocent.”

The elders bowed politely to one another, but once Gaius’s party left the house, Brovik turned to Kurt and me, seething. “I don’t believe either of you for a moment. Mia killed Dirk, and stole something precious to Gaius. I allowed this little romance to blossom but it seems you’re both bent on defying me. I’ve given you freedom, boy, to come and go as you please, entrusting you with responsibility far above your state, never treating you as my thrall, demanding others respect you. Indeed, I’ve lavished love and protection I’d have given a son of my body. You want for nothing. I defied custom to grant you this concubine. Above all, I granted you *eternal life*. I deserve undying gratitude but instead you defy me.” He paused for a moment to let Kurt reply, but as usual my lover kept his counsel. “You say nothing?”

Kurt shrugged. “Everything you say is true.”

“Despite the old head on your shoulders, lust has rendered you adolescent. I can’t change your appetite, but I demand loyalty. Are you plotting against me?”

“There’s no place I could go, except to the Wolf, and I find him disgusting.”

“You know enough to bring me down. If you plan to use whatever she took from Gaius against me, he’ll have all the proof he needs to take your heads. But there’ll be no need, because I’ll kill you both with my bare hands. Understand? You have thirty-six hours, *my dear boy*. Take her home, and then bring me what she stole. If not, I’ll unleash the dogs.”

Brovik and Kurt stared at one another coldly, until Brovik turned to ascend to his tower. Kurt wrapped a sheepskin throw tenderly around my shoulders and led me to the elevator. During the drive to the airfield, he was in a bad state. He had much to lose from this breach with Brovik. I let him sort it out, waiting for him to unburden his mind. I was done with pushing him. This was ultimately his decision.

Finally he spoke, “when I was fifteen, lying there while that mortal monster had his way with me, I tried to reason why. Why was I forced to suffer this? Why were my family loaded into trains and exterminated like cattle? Why was I living in hell on earth? Why had good people allowed these horrors to happen? I concluded there were no good people left. All were monsters because they did *nothing*. If we join Leisha, we don’t know if it will be better. It may be much worse, but I can’t stand by any longer without doing something. I *hate* Brovik for what he made me do to you. He doesn’t trust me anymore. What privileges and authority I have will disappear until I’m his slave in fact.” He continued to stare at the dark road ahead. “Whatever we do—it must be done very fast.”

“Are you saying what I think you are?”

He glanced at me and then turned his eyes back on the snow-covered pavement. “Call Leisha, I’ll get the money. We have thirty-six hours.”

When we parted at the airstrip, I was terrified I’d never see him again.

Leisha met me when I landed in New York. I explained everything that had happened with Dirk and about the discs but didn't produce them yet on Kurt's advice. She was very excited by the news. The necessary groundwork was already laid for the deal. It remained for her to fly west to close it.

When Kurt called from Switzerland to get the routing information for the wire transfer, he had concerns about the deal and asked to speak to her.

She took the phone and listened a moment then replied, "Fifty-fifty. I put this deal together... *No, no way... I'm* running this show... Sure, of course you can... You will, absolutely. I prepared the contracts myself... Good, see you soon... Oh and thanks, Kurt... I couldn't do this without you."

I took the phone from her. Kurt didn't sound convinced. "I don't trust her. Whatever happens to me, be strong. Don't let her push you around."

I was confused. "You're coming, right?"

"I'll do everything in my power. Just be careful. I love you."

"I love you. Kurt—" He'd already hung up.

When I got off of the phone Leisha hugged me. "Well done, Mia."

"I had no control over what's happened. It's a quirk of fate."

"You made him love you. That's all you needed to do."

"And he's paying dearly for it. If anything happens to him, you're on your own."

She kissed my cheek. "Mia, we're sisters forever. If anything happens to Kurt, I'll take care of you."

I pushed her away. "If he dies, so help me, I'll kill myself."

"Don't talk that way. He'll be fine. He's smart and has friends among the rats watching out for him. Just go and get the discs, we can get whatever

you need later.” Her face was all sad and concerned, but her eyes were cold. I didn’t trust her either.

Leisha and Kurt have very different ideas about how things should be done, Joe. That’s why she’s trying to cause problems between us now. Only if I back her, can she do whatever she wants. It’s that simple.”

Joe tapped his pen against his clipboard. “You both agreed to this because you thought you had no other alternative?”

“Neither of us are lawyers, nor were we in the position at the time to hire our own. We knew it was a bad deal, but we had no choice. The plan was, when Kurt landed in New York, we’d drive a rental car upstate to hide out until everything was ready here. We’d go over everything with her then—but nothing went according to plan.

The next evening, I retrieved the discs, diamonds and gun, and then went back to the airport to pick up the rental car and wait for Kurt’s flight. But when it arrived, he didn’t get off. I panicked. I checked my cell. I’d turned it off while I slept. The screen lit up when I pressed the button. He’d left a voicemail.

“Mia, he’s called out dogs already. I was followed to Zurich. I’m hiding outside Munich, with a band of rats. You can’t help. Go on without me. I’ll find you somehow. I love you—be careful!”

I wasn’t about to leave the best thing that ever happened to me behind to be killed, so I did the only thing I could. I called in a favor. I decided to test Ethan’s cherished honor.

As I reached the parking garage and unlocked the car, three huge dogs came out of nowhere. Cash, of the scarred face and long hair approached, holding a gun pointed at me. “All right girly-girl, come along quiet like.”

I reached for my pistol and fired, the bullet grazing the top of his head. He fell. The others ran for cover behind a car. Another gun went off and searing pain ripped through my shoulder.

“Shit!”

I wobbled on my feet for a moment. Another bullet whizzed by my ear. I ducked behind the car, as a siren wailed in the distance, and six armed security guards raced toward us.

Cash called to the others. “Let’s go!”

They took off with the guards pursuing them. I crawled under the rental car to hide. My shoulder hurt like hell, and I was bleeding copiously. After the coast was clear, I crawled out. I stuffed a pair of panties from my knapsack under my jacket to stanch the wound, and then eased myself into the car. Reeling with pain, I drove toward the interstate.

Faint with blood loss, I pulled up to the gate at Caithness a few hours before sunrise, and buzzed Ethan. “It’s Mia, I’m hurt.”

The gate opened and I drove through. I was very weak. Ethan ran out of the house toward me. I collapsed against him.

“Who in hell’s name did this to you?”

“Brovik’s dogs,”

“What have you done? Never mind that. You need blood. I’ll take the bullet out and dress the wound. You can explain later.”

Ethan gave me warmed blood to revive me, and then fetched forceps, some soap and water and a worn white cotton sheet. “Haven’t done this in over a century.” I winced as he washed the blood away and probed the wound. He located the bullet and yanked it out with a sharp movement, applying pressure until the bleeding stopped. He tore strips from the sheet to bandage the wound. “No worries about infection, but this won’t heal overnight. It will hurt like hellfire, and you’ll need more blood. Another couple of inches and it would have hit your heart. What happened?”

I told him the whole story about killing Dirk as he dressed the wound. I ended with the decision Kurt and I had made to join Leisha.

Ethan was horrified. “Sweet bleeding Christ!”

“Gaius’s people mapped our genome. Brovik’s have isolated the mutating agent. We had no choice but to strike out on our own.”

“The three of you can’t pull Brovik down on your own! You’ll have Brovik *and* Gaius after you, and when word gets out the Grand Council will scream for your blood as well. Why come to me now? You should have consulted me before you totally took leave of your senses!”

“Kurt is hiding outside Munich with a band of rats. We have to help him.”

Ethan darkened. “Let him make his own way.”

“I can’t let him die!” I appealed to his sense of chivalry. “You said if I ever needed *anything* you’d help me.”

“Brovik will kill us all!”

“He won’t kill you.”

“Don’t bet on it. Can you get in touch with Kurt?”

“His cell is disconnected.”

“Smart. He could be tracked by it.” Ethan thought for a minute. “Incredibly risky, even if we could locate the rats.”

I broke into tears. “Please. I’m begging! I can’t live without him.”

Ethan heaved a complicated sigh, as he finished the bandage. “Very well, *cara mia*, I’ll do whatever I can.”

We departed for Germany on a commercial flight the next evening, landing in Munich before dawn. From there, we drove to a *pensione* outside the city, where Ethan booked a room, saying Brovik’s dogs might be watching the big hotels. He didn’t sleep, but ordered me to, while he got on the phone. After sunset, he went out, telling me to stay put, returning shortly with a pistol concealed in his coat.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Always ways of finding anything if you’re resourceful, let’s hope we have the same luck with Kurt. Now about this pack, they tend to frequent abandoned buildings. I’ve made some inquiries, and there are several likely places.” He laid out a map on the table. “This one however is intriguing, an abandoned tubercular sanatorium in the mountains, lots of room to house them, and convenient to the city, but secluded enough to avoid scrutiny. We’ll look there first.”

We set off in a leased car. It began to snow, the deserted roads becoming very slippery. Several miles into the mountains, we came to a long drive leading to a large building, covered in crumbling stucco and overgrown ivy. Ethan pulled the car off the road into a thicket of shrubs.

“Stay close, Mia. They don’t know who we are, or what we want. If Kurt is here, they might think we mean harm.”

We set off on foot toward the building. One by one they melted out of the shadows, small, deadly wraiths. The leader, who appeared to be ten or so when made, stepped forward on legs that looked too thin to support his starveling body. Wispy blond hair fell into hollowed brown eyes.

“We’re looking for someone.” Ethan held up a hundred marks. “Perhaps you’ve seen him?”

Glittering eyes watched us warily, as they fanned out into a circle around us. The leader swaggered up to Ethan, snatching the money away, slipping easily into English, “We are fifteen here,” the boy said, in a pure soprano. “Who are you looking for?”

“He’s not part of your pack. His name is Kurt.”

“Brovik’s minion? Lots looking for him. Who’s she?”

“Mia.” It was difficult for him to say the next part. “They’re bound to one another.”

“It’s all right, Max,” Kurt said, as he moved into the light. “She’s the one I told you about.”

“I’m not worried about *her*.”

Ethan cleared his throat. “I give my word I won’t harm anyone. We’ve come to help.”

“You lie! You’re the Northman’s alpha. You’ve come to take him!”

“This woman is of my making. I’m sworn to aid her.”

“Max, it’s fine,” Kurt assured him, as he approached. “It’s cold. Tell the boys to go inside.”

Max looked up with puppy dog eyes at Kurt, taking his hand. “Kurt?”

“I’m leaving with them.”

“Stay, we’ll protect you.”

“No, I’ve endangered you enough already.” Kurt turned to Ethan. “I have no money. They’ve given me shelter. I’ll repay you when I can.”

Ethan pulled out his billfold, peeling off another hundred marks. Kurt looked at it in disgust. “They’ve risked their lives.”

Ethan cursed under his breath, handing Kurt four more. Kurt gave them to Max.

“Get more blankets and kerosene. It’s too cold in there. I hope someday to do more.”

“You’re our brother, Kurt. You’ve always been good to us.”

Kurt smiled and ruffled Max’s hair. “You’ve been a good friend. Be careful.”

The little vampire flashed a grubby grin, embracing Kurt, and then whistled to his pack. They scurried back into the shadows like the rodents they were named for.

I threw my arms around Kurt, kissing him all over his dirty face. He turned to Ethan. “Why did you let her do this?”

“I’ve never been able to make her do a damn thing she didn’t want to. How ‘bout you?”

“Max says dogs are watching the airports and train stations surrounding Munich. You have a car?”

“Yes, we could try for Austria.”

Kurt shook his head. “They’re watching the borders. Better head north to Frankfurt. If we can avoid them, we can get a plane to the states there.”

Ethan looked at his watch. “It’s after seven. The weather is getting worse.”

Snow fell heavily in big sticky white flakes.

“Then we’ll have to wait it out here.”

“I won’t stay in this filthy hole, and I won’t allow Mia.”

Kurt’s eyes narrowed. “You put her out on a night like this with nothing but the clothes on her back. Come on, if we wait any longer, you’ll have no choice.

We went only a mile, before the roads became impassable. We had to turn back, but when Ethan turned the car it spun, crashing into a snow bank. Ethan and Kurt got out, pushing it, but it wouldn’t budge. We were stranded.

Kurt called to Ethan through the snow. “It’s no use! We must go back on foot. When the weather clears we’ll come back.”

Ethan cursed, opening the door for me. “Come on, we’re walking.”

I grumbled as my boots filled with slush. “Sure wish we had the power to control the elements like Dracula.”

“Even Immortys bow to mother nature,” Ethan replied.

The three of us trudged through the snow until we reached the building. Kurt ran up to the door and beat on it.

“*Max, kommt hier!*”

Max opened the door, admitting us as Kurt explained our predicament. Max nodded in ascent and we followed him down a set of stairs into what appeared to be a large ward filled with old iron beds. A couple of kerosene heaters and filthy blankets provided some warmth. The floor was littered with trash and piles of moldering books they burned in a fireplace. The place reeked of rotting flesh and kerosene fumes. I gagged. As we entered the room the rats protested Ethan’s presence. Max shut them up, gathering them together to explain the situation.

“Feral animals,” Ethan muttered.

“They’re our only hope. Don’t be so fastidious, Ethan. You perpetuate a system that creates and casts them aside.”

“Until very recently you were part of this system.”

Kurt had no love for Ethan and had no trouble telling him just what he thought. “Officially, I was no better off. You’ve certainly treated me as badly as you treat them.”

“How long have you known Max?” I asked.

“After the war I came back to see if anyone I knew was alive. Max had lost his family in the war and fell victim to one bloodsucker or another who used him for a few years then cast him aside. I’ve given the pack money for years. In return they fed me information about Brovik’s enemies.”

Kurt led me to a bed near one of the heaters. He stripped off my gloves and kissed my fingertips, rubbing them in his hands. “You’re hands are cold.”

He placed the least filthy blanket he could find around my shoulders and held me. The stench of the place made me gag.

Ethan sat across from us on another bed, watching Kurt caress my hair as we tried to get warm. “Are you in pain?”

“I’m fine. It’s the smell.”

Kurt looked around. “They lure victims here— pedophiles, drug dealers— whatever scum they can. The ground is frozen. They can’t bury them. They put them into the cellar until they get enough petrol to burn them.”

“You don’t smell so good yourself, darling.”

“I’d give anything for a bath.” His smile melted me as always. “You shouldn’t have come but I’m glad. Lie down and rest.” He slipped off my jacket, discovering the bandage on my arm. “What’s this?”

“I was shot. Ethan fixed me up.”

Ethan was clearly uncomfortable. “It’s a clean wound. It will heal.”

“The dogs did this?”

I nodded.

“He didn’t waste time,” Kurt said, grimly.

Max hurried over to us with news. “The pack agrees to let the alpha stay.”

“Thanks for nothing,” Ethan muttered.

“You must leave as soon as the weather clears. The radio says the storm will end by morning. By evening the roads should be better.”

We huddled around the heater not talking much. Before dawn Kurt and I curled close on the mattress. Ethan didn’t try to sleep, obviously not trusting our hosts. I closed my eyes and fell asleep, lulled by the deep, shushing rhythm of Kurt’s heartbeat.

Kurt was already in deep conversation with Max while I was just rising. Max scratched his bushy little head, looking perplexed.

Ethan got to his feet. "What's wrong?"

Kurt turned to us, his face set and tense. "Someone's missing."

"Karl took the Vespa," said Max. "We never travel alone."

"Little bastard sold us out," Ethan said.

"We don't know that, but we should get to the car and see if we can start it." Kurt took my hand. As I reached for my jacket, the building suddenly shook and swayed. Plaster hailed down onto our heads, as a huge orange swath of fire roared through the room engulfing poor Max. Kurt dragged me to the steps with Ethan on our heels. We ran up into the demolished lobby, where fires were burning all around and above us, a piece of burning debris nearly knocking Kurt to the ground.

"Look out!" I screamed.

"The door is blocked by the fire!" Ethan yelled. "Find another way out!"

"Here!" Kurt called, pulling me down the hall and out through a ruined sunroom littered with long broken shards of glass. The three of us made it outside just as the roof collapsed. Inside we heard screams of the unfortunates who didn't escape. Those who did were running in all directions, taking cover in the bushes.

A helicopter stood before us with blades whirling. Through the firelight strode Brovik toward us. We found ourselves surrounded by four large dogs bearing assault weapons.

"Restrain them."

Guns pressed up against our heads, as we were bound in chains, and pushed into the helicopter. Brovik climbed in, motioning to the pilot to take off.

When we landed later on Brovik's island, we were dragged inside to the main room, the dogs training weapons on us, as Brovik drew a gleaming knife from an elaborate sheath.

"Ethan, I'm surprised," he said. "You always hated the boy."

"I'm sworn to protect, Mia."

"My cavalier, once again you back the losing cause." Brovik motioned to the guards. "Release them, but watch them closely."

One dog with long blond hair like Brovik's, unlocked the manacles, taking a handful of ass as he did mine.

"There's unfinished business before I execute the three of you. Where is my money—and what did Mia do with the Wolf's property? Only one thing would make him so frantic. Just tell me, my dear, where to find the money and data, and it'll be quick and painless."

"If I don't?"

"These gentlemen will do as they like to you, while these two miserable fools look on."

"Ethan knows nothing. Aside from helping me find Kurt, he did nothing."

"Aiding you, he becomes my enemy." Brovik took Kurt's face into his hands, speaking softly, "You made this transaction. Tell me where you wired the money, and you can die holding her in your arms."

As hard as it was to agree, he didn't give Brovik what he wanted. He looked at his master, face in anguish. "I have nothing to tell."

Brovik released Kurt as if his skin was made of burning acid. "Gentlemen, the lady is yours."

"Brovik, this is very bad form!" protested Ethan. "I have the right to a proper execution. Since she's mine they can't touch her. I demand her essence before you take mine."

“The time for formalities has passed, Ethan.” Brovik turned his attention to me. “As for her, you cast her off. She’s my property now.”

“Let us die in the old way.”

“Not enough sun here to finish the job. You’d rot for hours. It’s a mercy to do this quickly.”

“We have a right to die under the sky and see the sun. I have no great desire to live on this Earth, but I should like to feel the sun on my face once more before I die. Besides, do you really want her blood on your hands?”

Ethan was crafty. If there were any chance Brovik would die, it would have to be this night. We’d never have another chance, because we’d be dead. If Brovik would agree to kill us in the ceremonial way, there might be a chance. I had to prod him in the right direction. He’d know if I were telling the truth about the discs, so I decided to do just that.

I spoke up. “I stole computer discs with DNA sequences on them.”

Brovik walked up to me. “Is this the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Where are they?”

“In a locker at the Port Authority, the key is around my neck.”

He hesitated then unzipped my jacket, drawing out the key on its silver chain with his knife. Brovik’s one flaw was his ancient tendency toward superstition. He didn’t want to touch me for fear I’d somehow rise up and murder him where he stood. He really would prefer Ethan do the actual deed.

“It’s true,” I said. “Ask Kurt.”

Kurt met his master’s gaze head on. “I helped her hide them.”

“I knew she’d turn you.” Brovik motioned to his dogs. “Take them outside. Prepare the pyres.”

We were dragged into the bitterly cold night. The aurora wavered ghostly over our heads, as they forced us to our knees. I kneeled between Kurt and Ethan, shivering as Kurt took my hand.

“Don’t be afraid, Mia.”

“I’m sorry I’ve dragged you down with me. It’s time, Kurt. This is the night. It ends tonight.”

Kurt turned to Ethan and said, “The knife. He’ll give you it to cut her throat. Do it cleanly.”

“I know how it’s done,” Ethan replied.

Brovik came out to us, carrying the large knife by its beautifully carved whalebone handle. His unbound hair whipped about his face in the wind. “The woman first,” he said, handing the knife to Ethan.

At that moment, Kurt launched himself at Brovik and knocked him down, as Ethan whirled and beheaded the two guards. Brovik threw Kurt off like a rag doll and faced Ethan. Kurt snatched up one of the rifles, and shot the other two guards who ran toward us from the piles of wood they were preparing, and then whirled toward where Brovik grappled with Ethan. He raised the gun and took aim, but Brovik rushed him and broke it in two, crushing the other weapon to bits beneath his feet. Ethan threw himself on Brovik, shouting, “Kurt, take her into the house and lock it down! Do you hear me? Run!”

Kurt grabbed my hand and pulled me back toward the house, as I screamed, “No!”

I turned my head to see Brovik hurl himself at Ethan, and tear the knife from his hand. They fell to the ground struggling. Just as we cleared the door to the cave serving as a garage for Brovik’s collection of cars, Kurt hit

a switch on the wall that brought the steel security shutters down around the windows and doors.

I tried to grab for the switch, but Kurt pulled me away. “We can’t leave Ethan out there!” I screamed.

“Mia, this is what he wanted! Don’t you see?” Kurt took my hysterical face in his hands. “I hated him, but I understand why he did this. He had to. It’s his redemption.” I broke down crying in a heap on the floor. Kurt wrapped his arms around me and tried to comfort me. “Hush, he’ll finally be at peace, while we have many more trials to face.”

We huddled in the cave, numb from the events until the sun rose and set again. Outside, we followed a blood trail through the snow to the boat. We found two bodies onboard, disfigured and lifeless, only the hair, fair and dark identified them. Necrotic flesh, overcooked meat covered in a putrid jelly-like substance, fell away from the bones. I turned and vomited while Kurt held me.

Kurt found a can of gasoline in the boathouse and poured it over the deck. Then he started the motor, while I waited on the dock. Kurt lit the gasoline, and flames leapt up over the boat. He jumped out onto the dock, and set the boat adrift on the fiord. We watched, hand-in-hand, as the burning craft disintegrated and sunk below the icy water. Kurt’s troubled eyes blinked back tears, as it finally slipped out of sight.

Suddenly, the sound of a helicopter thumped toward us and we began to run.”

Mia looked up, a single tear running down her face.

“Ethan sacrificed himself for you?”

“One hundred and sixty-eight years he walked this planet, then nothing. Poof, it’s all over. Now do you understand why I’m here?”

“I’m sorry, Mia.”

“Vampires aren’t supposed to cry.” She wiped her eyes. “Gaius knows we’re here somewhere. It’s only a matter of time before he puts this all together.”

“That’s why this place is so well protected.”

“If Gaius succeeds, the average mortal’s life won’t mean a thing. Immortyls will inherit the earth. Genocide on a scale never seen before.”

“How did you manage to finally get here?”

“Philip hid us for a while in London. He was shocked of course, but understood why we acted as we did. He gave us money to fly here. We hid with another group of rats in LA until Leisha was ready for us. Little did we know she was building us a prison here...”

“All that data. It will save years of work. If she agrees to allow you to be together, you’ll give it to her?”

“That’s all it’s going to take.”

“I’ll get her to agree,” Joe said.

Mia looked doubtful. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“I’m not going to let her get away with this.”

“I don’t want that bitch Loy there when I talk to her.” Mia subsided into silence, her thoughts far away again.

Joe felt it was best to let her alone now. “Thanks Mia, I understand things a lot better now.”

She looked up, her misty, mirrored eyes reflecting Joe’s image. “You’re a good man Joe. You tied yourself to the mast and resisted the siren.”

TWENTY-TWO

* * * *

Lydia stood in her office, attired in the lab coat Joe suspected she wore to bed, while Leisha gave him an appraising stare. He'd never seen anything like her. She was cold and frightening, over six feet tall, athletic, and a hell of a lot bigger than the two in the cells.

"Doctor Ansari, a great pleasure to meet you. I want to personally thank you for your work with the female subject."

"Her name is Mia."

Lydia shot him a warning look. "Joe has established quite a rapport with our subjects. If it wasn't for him we wouldn't have gotten this far."

Spooky amber eyes fixed on his. "You've made great strides. You've begun looking into their empathic ability?"

"It appears to stem from a biochemical transmitter stimulating the brain, to produce a psychic vibration so to speak, echoing the feelings of the donor inside of the receiver."

"No magic involved?"

"Well, we aren't quite sure how they transmit to the brain so rapidly or what component in the blood they latch on to. We need to isolate it. It's my guess that hunger floods the transmitter into the brain. I'm still reviewing the data on tests we made. Hopefully we'll be able to track it down."

Leisha smiled her chilly smile. "I'm thrilled but it's just a start. There's so much still to be done."

Joe took a deep breath. "Cut the crap, *Leisha*. Mia's told me everything. I know who and *what* you are. It doesn't take a genius to figure out why you

two sent me in there.”

Leisha leaned her long body languorously against the doorframe, while Lydia hovered anxiously in the background. “Well, Mia *has* told you a lot, except the thing we need most.”

“It’s very simple. Put them together again and they’ll talk. And don’t give me that safety bullshit. It’s Kurt. You really hate him. He risked his life to make this happen, and you sent me in to cause tension between them. They both want to talk to you.”

“I was planning on it, after I reviewed your notes.”

“No, Mia wants to see you now, and she wants me there.”

“What business do you have with us?”

“From what she tells me every person on this planet has a stake in this. I guess she doesn’t trust you, can’t imagine why.”

“No need to be sarcastic, Doctor.” Leisha straightened up her long frame.
“Fine, I have nothing to hide. Let’s go.”

Joe turned to Lydia. “Not you, she specifically stated she didn’t want you.”

Leisha nodded to Lydia. “Lydia, go home and get some rest. You’ve done a superb job here. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“If you’re sure there’s nothing else?”

Leisha’s voice was a caress, “No, please go home. It’s getting late.”

It’s going to be interesting, Joe thought as he followed Leisha through the hall to the cells, wishing like hell he didn’t have to witness this catfight.

Leisha had special clearance to the cells. She stepped forward, saying her name and the series of doors opened to her. Mia stood, dressed in a leather bustier, pants, and boots, a pint-sized dominatrix. *Very hot.* Leisha’s eyes

scanned the room then rested on Mia's face. They looked hard at each other, not a glimmer of emotion passing over them.

Leisha moved to embrace Mia, but she hauled off and slapped her across the face. "You lying bitch! He risked everything!"

Joe braced for something ugly to happen, but Leisha's face registered nothing at Mia's outburst. She replied with exaggerated patience, as if to a small child, "He could do us great harm. I worked with him for over ten years, Mia. I know a hell of a lot more than you think. He did lots of ugly things to please his master. How many mortals died for not keeping their mouths shut? Your boy gave the instructions to the dogs, and paid them off. I'm not taking orders from that little prick again. If he influences you, he'll run roughshod over me, and if you'll excuse me, you know nothing."

"Kurt and I've discussed our views on this enterprise in depth. We're on the same page philosophically. We've all done ugly things, *Leisha*. Why do you think we want to end this nightmare? Guess what? I'm not giving up those discs unless I get what I want. Clock is ticking. Gaius has a six-month jump; Brovik's data is languishing in files no one but Kurt can access. It's up to you. Keep us prisoners here and slog for years to catch up or bring us together and expedite this process?"

Leisha was beaten. It was scribbled untidily over her face. "You swear you'll give me the discs?"

Mia nodded. "Give Kurt his laptop and he'll get you the rest."

Leisha handed Joe a set of keys. "Doctor, the computer is locked in Lydia's cabinet. Obviously, our people haven't had any luck hacking his files. Mia, come with me."

"Gimme a minute. I haven't seen him in a month."

Mia crossed to her dressing table, picking up her hairbrush and running it through her hair. Pheromone spread through the room, as she rummaged in her drawer for lipstick to apply to her mouth.

Joe ran to Lydia's office and found Kurt's laptop locked in the cabinet. He caught up with Leisha and Mia at the outer door to Kurt's cell. Leisha moved forward to open the door. Joe handed the laptop to Mia. She winked mischievously. What was she trying to tell him?

Leisha opened the outer door and buzzed the intercom. Kurt came up to the glass. A long look passed between them before Leisha broke the silence. "Kurt."

"Leisha, you finally got *everything* you wanted." He held his wrists out toward her. "What else is there but the blood in my veins?"

"Don't be ridiculous, all I want is the data. We're losing time."

He snapped. "Whose fault is that? I never should have trusted you."

"What choice did you have? You were *persona non grata*. It made sense for us to join forces."

"And you separated us, because we'll join forces against you?"

"It was a mistake. I've brought a peace offering." She opened the door and stepped aside as Mia moved forward holding the laptop. "She's here to stay. Now maybe we'll get somewhere."

Mia dropped the computer onto the desk, falling into Kurt's arms with a strangled cry. They covered one another with frantic kisses.

It was an intensely private moment. Joe felt uncomfortable, yet oddly touched. In the soft light, they looked like young lovers. He glanced at Leisha to gauge her reaction to the scene. The bronze statue gazed enigmatically through golden eyes. Was she was feeling anything?

Her honey-smooth voice interrupted their embrace, "So, where are my discs?"

Mia pulled away from Kurt breathlessly, withdrawing a key on a long silver chain from her bosom. "Port Authority— couldn't go back." She turned back to Kurt, their bodies locking onto each other, opposite poles of two

magnets. “You got your goddamned discs, Leisha,” she snarled. “Now get the fuck out of here.”

Joe nudged Leisha. “Leave them alone now.”

She nodded and turned to the door, placing her fingertip on the reader. Kurt waited until they cleared the door, then snapped off the lights so all that burned was a small bedside lamp. Joe took a final glance over his shoulder to see them fall in a tangle on the bed.

Leisha’s face remained unreadable as they walked back to his office. “I have to leave for New York tonight Doctor, but I need to ask a favor.”

“A favor? What kind of favor?” Joe opened the door to his office for her, but she didn’t come inside, instead hovering by the door uncomfortably. “I didn’t think you considered me an ally, Ms. Brookings.”

Leisha frowned. “We’re on the same side, Doctor. There’s an Immortyl looking for them in LA, probably some bounty hunter hired by the Wolf. I’m taking them out of here but it’ll have to wait till I get back. In the meantime, I’ve had security doubled at night, and no other staff here after hours. That’s why I sent Lydia home. Obviously, he can’t do much until after dark. Lydia is aware of this but I’d feel better if you’d keep an eye on them till I get back.”

“Me? What good am I against one of those things?” He realized too late what he’d said, but she didn’t take offense. Apparently, she didn’t put herself in the same class.

“Immortyls can be killed in conventional ways. Shoot ‘em in the head or heart with a large enough caliber bullet and they’ll die. Take my word for it. I’ve mowed down a few. We just have to be ready for them. You’ve earned Kurt and Mia’s trust. I obviously haven’t done such a good job of that. If there’s a crisis, they’ll follow your lead. Believe me, I don’t want them harmed.”

“And if something happens? Where do I take them?”

“Anywhere they’ll be safe. I’m entrusting their welfare to you, because I know you’ll protect them.”

She turned away, tawny skirt and copper hair swirling with her movement, metal and tortoise shell tinkling like tiny bells on her long limbs. Joe’s breath caught. Her hips swayed as she walked slowly down the corridor, her stride loose and swinging. A lioness on the prowl, a magnificent creature, no doubt about that, but one who could devour in a single lethal bite. Despite her reassurances they were on the same side, he was terrified. What were they loosing on the world? She turned, regarding him for a moment with her steady golden gaze, before stepping inside the elevator.

Joe was scared of a lot of things now. Making his way back to the lab, he started backing up all his files on disc, unable to shake the feeling of impending doom as he packed them and the notes he’d made with Mia into his bag. Put them in a safe place, he figured, just in case. The air conditioning dripped, plop, plop, like water inside a cave. In the dim light, the equipment cast strange skeleton shadows on the walls. He was exhausted, but he couldn’t leave now. Setting his watch alarm, he leaned back in the chair and dozed off.

The alarm pinged at four a.m. Stomach acids churned and growled. He hadn’t thought to eat anything since the previous morning. He rubbed his eyes, rising stiffly from the chair.

Making his way to the lounge, he surveyed the choices available in the snack machines. Honey-roasted peanuts and chips weren’t going to do it. There were better offerings upstairs in the cafeteria machines. He could grab a dry sandwich or wilted salad, at least.

He pushed through the doors into the corridor, passing the cells on his right, trying not to imagine Mia and Kurt behind the closed doors. Drawing each other’s blood, fucking like rabbits, or both?

This strange connection between blood and brain was deeply disturbing, yet spurred his curiosity. No instrument could test this. It was something he’d personally never understand even if he studied them for a century. As Mia said, the only way to understand was to experience it. He’d have to find a

way less dangerous. But if Leisha took them away, how would it affect his research? He'd done rudimentary neurological tests, the usual scans, but he needed to study them over time. Would he ever get the chance?

At the elevator, he stopped and listened—no sound, either in the corridor or above his head, only the omnipresent air-conditioning, humming and dripping from the ductwork overhead. The door opened and he stepped inside.

The doors opened on the lobby. Joe looked across at the guard desk. Strange, it was empty. Usually, at least one guard was seated there. Perhaps they'd just gone on rounds or to the restroom. His heartbeat accelerated as a burst of adrenalin hit him. Sweat broke out on the surface of his skin, leaving his shirt damp, sticky, and clammy against his back in the artificially chilled air. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong. Then halfway across the terrazzo floor to the employee cafeteria, he saw the blood.

A large pool with bits of brain matter lay spattered beneath his feet. A sticky maroon trail led off in the direction of the cafeteria. Joe flattened against the wall, sliding his way stealthily to the swinging doors to peer in. Soft, power saving, after-hours lighting glowed overhead.

Its back was toward him, clad in black leather, with long, pale hair flowing over its broad shoulders like a cape. It was bent over a mass of wires attached to a box, a bomb. Nearby, mangled bodies of three security guards lay in a bloody heap, brains and guts spilling onto the floor. Joe broke out in a heavy sweat, willing himself not to breathe, or make any sound as he slid backward toward the elevator and flashed his id card at the scanner. The electronic voice betrayed him.

“Good morning, Doctor Ansari, please move forward for identification.”

Joe threw himself toward the retina scanner. The intruder roared, running toward the elevator at lightning speed.

“Identification complete.”

The doors opened and Joe fell inside the elevator. A dark shape hurled itself toward the doors. Just as a withered hand reached in between, they closed. Joe grabbed the fire extinguisher, swinging it with all his strength at the probing fingers between them. A painful howl erupted from the vampire, as the bleeding fingers drew back and the doors shut completely. The elevator swiftly descended underground and Joe fell out running as soon as they opened. He flung himself against the outer door of Kurt's cell and went through the security procedure, cursing the delay. As the outer door opened, Joe stumbled to the next, banging frantically on the glass and buzzing the intercom.

Kurt's voice called out, "Go away!"

"Kurt, it's Joe," he panted. "There's a problem."

Kurt came to the glass, totally nude, hair damp and body covered in sweat. Tiny streams of blood ran from the corners of his mouth, and small wounds on various parts of his body. Joe turned away in shock, and explained the situation. Kurt cursed, calling Mia to get dressed. Joe leaned back against the wall struggling to catch his breath and calm down. He waited until they were both at the door before he opened it. Their faces were flushed, and they smelled strongly of sex.

Mia looked obviously annoyed. "What the hell is happening?"

"There's one of them here. Upstairs, he's killed the guards. We have to get out. He's got a bomb."

Kurt's head inclined slightly to the side as if an unpleasant thought occurred to him. "Did you get a good look at him?"

"From the back. It was pretty dark. He's big though and has long hair, like a biker. We need guns. There's some in a closet down here. Can you break the lock?"

Kurt's voice betrayed impatience, "Of course." Slinging his laptop over his shoulder, Kurt set off with Mia and Joe following into the corridor to the closet, where the weapons were locked. Kurt twisted the steel handle until it

broke, clattering to the floor. The door swung open. Inside, hung two high-powered rifles, a small pistol and a few tazers and dart guns. Kurt took down the firearms, checking to see if they were loaded. He tossed one of the rifles to Joe. “Can you shoot, Doctor?”

Joe nodded.

“Mia, my love?” Kurt handed the other rifle to Mia, who shouldered it, peering through the sight. Kurt caught Joe’s amazed expression. “She’s an expert marksman. She never told you? She’s deadlier than you know. It seems you have *some* secrets, *Liebchen*.” Kurt took the pistol, and grabbed extra boxes of ammunition stuffing them into the pockets of his suede jacket and the rest into Mia’s battered black leather one. “Aim for the head or heart, Doctor. Is he armed?”

“Probably disarmed the guards.”

Kurt looked around, his face tense. “Any other way out of the building from this level?”

“A freight elevator to the loading dock.”

“We’ll need a vehicle covered from the sun, like a van or truck.”

“The company van, I’ve used it to move equipment. The keys are in Lydia’s office.”

Kurt nodded. “Let’s go.”

They ran to Lydia’s office where Kurt kicked in the door. Joe went to the key safe and rifled through the keys. “Shit— not here. Lydia must have them.”

Mia spoke up, “I can hot wire a car.”

Joe and Kurt both looked at her in disbelief.

“Ethan taught me.”

Kurt smiled. “You’re an amazing woman.”

Joe led them through a set of double doors into a storage room where lab equipment and office supplies were stacked on shelves and pallets. The three of them stepped into the freight elevator. Joe closed the gate and the elevator lurched into operation.

“Christ, this thing is noisy,” said Mia.

“Be ready to fire,” warned Kurt.

They raised weapons in anticipation of attack as the elevator opened into another storage area with swinging doors leading out onto the loading dock. They stepped cautiously outside the elevator. Kurt tilted his head, listening. “Can’t hear him,” he whispered. “Mia?”

She shook her head.

Joe pointed with the rifle. “There’s the van.”

Kurt nodded. “I’ll cover this door. You go with Mia.”

Kurt leaned against the swinging door, training his gun on the doors leading back into the building. Joe covered Mia as she broke the window to open the van door. She crouched down and went to work on the wires, cursing under her breath.

Air swirled down from the huge cooling duct overhead. The smallest of scrapes against metal made Kurt cock his head to the side. “*Scheisse*—something’s up there.”

Suddenly, a dark shape swooped down, dragging Kurt up into the duct above their heads. The pistol clattered to the floor and the bag containing his laptop dropped beside it.

Joe ran to retrieve the gun. “He’s got Kurt!”

Mia was by his side in an instant. “Where’s this lead? He won’t kill him. Gaius needs us alive to get those discs back.”

“It goes all through the building... he might have taken him to the cafeteria, where the bomb is.”

“Come on!”

They ran inside toward the atrium with weapons poised. Joe panted to keep up with Mia, as she easily outran him to the cafeteria to look inside. “Not here!”

Something scuttled above their head towards the atrium. “They’re still in the ductwork,” Mia whispered. They moved cautiously. Joe looked around, but didn’t see anything. Then a drop of blood hit the floor at their feet. Mia growled, raising her weapon above their heads. “Put him down, you bastard!”

A refined, slightly accented voice called down, “I’ll drop him if you shoot. His brains will spatter over the floor.”

Mia’s face went still, “It can’t be... *Brovik*? ”

Joe’s eyes followed up to the steel armature supporting the glass ziggurat atop the atrium. A vampire, his face seared like melting wax, with long, pale hair, clutched Kurt to him in a death grip.

“I thought he was dead.”

Brovik laughed. “A few hours of sunlight can’t kill one as old as me, Doctor Ansari. Yes, I know all about you. Very clever of the Amazon to put you to work on Mia, did you learn all of her *intimate secrets*? ”

“The body on the boat?” Mia gasped.

“That was one of my dogs you set adrift and burnt with Ethan. Kurt dearest, I was touched at the poetic gesture, but even you, my love, knew nothing about the air raid shelter I’d dug on the island before the war. Give me what I want, and I’ll let you fend for yourselves as long as you can against The Wolf. Try anything Mia, and I’ll kill the boy. Now, where are those discs, *cara mia*? ”

Mia raised the rifle to her shoulder, taking aim.

Joe grabbed her arm. “He’ll kill him!”

“Fucking liar will kill him anyway.” Mia squeezed the trigger. “Sorry about the discs Brovik, but here’s a little something from Sanjivani!”

Brovik roared as Mia fired. His head exploded in a spray of tissue and blood. The elder’s hands clung to Kurt for an instant before his corpse tottered and fell. With a desperate movement, Kurt wrenched free, catching the supporting structure, and hanging there as Brovik’s body plummeted ten stories to the terrazzo floor. The impact sounded like a melon splitting open. A vast pool of blood spread from the mangled body as burst guts spilled out onto the floor. Joe couldn’t look away, wondering what one thousand year old entrails would look like, but to his surprise they looked like any other.

“This body should be autopsied,” Joe mused.

“No time! We don’t know how soon that bomb will go off. Kurt, let’s go!”

Kurt climbed down the armature, an agile spider monkey, leaping lightly to the floor, his face covered in blood and brain matter.

“Yuck,” said Mia. A distant rumble shook the building. “Run!”

The three of them took off through the lobby and down the hall to the rear of the building. Mia and Kurt sped by Joe as if he stood still, a blur. Kurt opened the door onto the loading dock, scooping up his dropped laptop as Mia ran to the van, starting it up. Panting, Joe caught up with them and threw his bag in the back as he slipped into the driver’s seat. Kurt and Mia, not even winded, piled in the back, sitting on a pile of moving mats.

“What’s this?” Kurt asked, examining Joe’s bag.

“My research and other data I was given, notes of my sessions with Mia and a first aid kit. There are alcohol wipes in it. Clean yourself up. You look disgusting.”

Kurt smiled through the gore. “You’re all right, Doctor.”

Joe released the brake, hitting the gas. Just as the van screeched away from the building a huge explosion rocked them, fire and smoke poured out behind. Joe floored the ignition, clearing the building just as the side collapsed in a cloud of thick dust and debris. Another explosion went off and another until the entire building caved in. Brovik had imploded a tomb for himself and the dead guards. Joe sped out of the parking lot, crashing through the gate, noticing no guard posted there. “Brovik must have killed the guards here too.”

“Where you taking us?” Mia asked.

“Maryland. My friend Carol works for the NIH. She has some powerful friends. If they can’t protect you, no one can.”

Kurt protested. “Gaius has government people in his pay!”

“It’s our only chance. Leisha was going to move you, but after what Brovik did there isn’t any more Genpath, the project is dead.”

Kurt leaned over the seat. “Doctor, take us to Virginia, to Ethan’s house. We’ll hide there until you can speak with your friend. It belongs to Mia now. We need to fetch something. There’s nothing in that locker in New York but a letter saying we’re through with Leisha. I suspected something like this might occur and we planted it there before we came here. We were planning to escape—with your help of course. The discs are at Caithness.”

“Won’t she’ll figure where you are?”

“She’s never been there,” Mia said. “But we’ll have to be careful. The Wolf might be watching the house.”

Joe looked over the dash to the lightening sky. “Sun’s starting to rise, better take cover.”

Kurt spread out the moving pads to make a bed. Mia leaned over the seat
“You must be exhausted.”

“Soon as it gets dark we’ll head to an airport. I’ll call Carol to warn her.”

Kurt peered over the seat. “Joe, we appreciate the great risk you’re taking.”

“You never called me anything but Doctor before. Why the sudden familiarity?”

“We’re partners now, whether you want it or not.”

“Shit, got to call my wife. She’ll think I’m dead.” Joe pulled out his phone and hit the speed dial. He spoke rapidly to Rima, his voice tense, telling her there was an explosion but he was safe. He had to go to Washington for a while, but not to tell anyone where he was. He couldn’t tell her more, but he’d be in touch.

Joe glanced back. The two vampires huddled together on the pile of moving pads, like a couple of kids, their fate in his hands. He turned his eyes to the road ahead. The sun bled red over the horizon. Bad weather ahead. Joe turned the van up the ramp onto the interstate, heading east into the storm.

BLURB FOR TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

BOOK TWO OF THE IMMORTYL REVOLUTION:

* * * *

Narrowly escaping the implosion of Genpath Laboratories, vampire lovers, Mia Disantini and Kurt Eisen are on the run from their rival in the “Forbidden Science”, Immortyl elder Gaius Lupus. When Kurt is captured by Gaius and rescued with the aid of feral child and teen vampires known as sewer rats, Mia witnesses first hand the charismatic spell her lover casts over these would-be revolutionaries who vow to join Kurt in his mission to bring down the house of Gaius. Meeting obstacles to government funding to support the research that will one day allow them to walk in the sun, Kurt builds his forces, while Mia navigates the minefield of rat politics, where she is distressed to be shunted into the background and viewed merely as an overly ambitious concubine who stands between the beloved “Loki” and his followers, particularly the oddly timid, but beautiful Arturo who threatens to sever the deep bond between Mia and Kurt.

Will Kurt and Mia defeat Gaius’s brutal attacks and realize their dream of a cure for their condition? Will the new order they establish survive betrayal from within? And will their love adapt to the challenge of a third partner?

EXCERPT FROM TWILIGHT OF THE GODS:

* * * *

Kurt grabbed Rob by the shirtfront. “Were you followed?”

The boy jerked away. “Don’t think so.”

I scanned the area for scents and sounds, gripping my weapon tightly. Nothing. “No one here, take a breath Rob.” I lowered the rifle.

Rob took note of our guns. “Jesus, you two are serious about this.”

Kurt’s ire rose. “Idiot! You could have led them right to us!”

“I sent them the other way, half-pint.”

A low growl rumbled from Kurt’s chest. A car pulled up to the gate at the end of the drive. Doors opened and shut. Muffled voices floated through the air toward us. An unmistakable scent filled the air.

Hairs on the back of my neck rose. “Kurt...”

Kurt’s brows met in the middle. “I smell them.”

Kurt grabbed my hand and I yanked Rob back into the trees with us.

“Rob, get down!” I whispered, raising my weapon. The three of us crouched down in the long grass. Crickets shrieked. Mosquitoes and chiggers pounced and burrowed into my arms and legs. I wanted to squirm but didn’t dare. A ways off, two more cars screeched up and their doors opened and shut. Shit.

Two Immortyl men in sleek suits vaulted over the gate of the stone fence, one huge, one not so big, but way bigger than Kurt or me. Gaius's dogs. They crept up the long drive, handguns leading. I trained my weapon on them.

The big one said to his shorter companion, "Remember, just slow them down. The Wolf wants them alive."

ABOUT AUTHOR DENISE VERRICO

* * * *

Denise Verrico is a New Jersey native who grew up in Western Pennsylvania. She attended Point Park College in Pittsburgh, where she majored in theatre arts. For seven seasons she was a member of The Oberon Theatre Ensemble in NYC with whom she acted, directed, designed and wrote plays. Cara Mia, Book One of the Immortyl Revolution is her first novel. Denise has enjoyed vampire stories from the time she was a little girl and a fan of the Dark Shadows television series. She enjoys non-fiction and fiction of all kinds, particularly historical fiction, thrillers, sci-fi, fantasy and most recently manga and graphic novels. She currently lives in Ohio with her husband, teenaged son and flock of seven parrots.

Visit her website at www.deniseverricowriter.webs.com

* * * *

-The End-

www.lldreamspell.com

Visit www.lldreamspell.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.